



THE  
Reincarnated Princess  
Spends Another Day  
SKIPPING STORY ROUTES

Story by Bisu  
Illustrations by Yukiko

6









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## CAST OF CHARACTERS

### Leonhart von Orsein

The knight captain of the Kingdom of Nevel's royal guard. The number one swordsman in the country. Rosemary's love interest.

### Fuzuki Kanon

[Heroine]

A girl summoned from another world. In the game, she was called the shrine maiden and tasked with the mission of defeating the demon lord.

### Nero

A black cat rescued by Michael. Rosemary's pet.

### Rosemary von Velfalt

A girl who was reincarnated into the world of an otome game and retained the memories of her past life. First princess of the Kingdom of Nevel. Resolves to rectify the suitor characters' personality faults in order to achieve a peaceful future.





## Crow

[Suitor]

A spy of the Kingdom of Nevel. Has a detached personality but possesses a caring side too.

## Ratte

A former Lapter assassin. Currently a Nevel spy.

## Ernst von Lieber

The former captain of the Kingdom of Nevel's border defense force. Leonhart's old friend.

## Teo Eilenberg

A sorcerer with command over fire-type magic. A cheerful and caring boy.

## Lutz Eilenberg

[Suitor Character]

A sorcerer with command over ice-type magic. Possesses remarkable talent that's said to appear only once in a century. Cool and misanthropic.



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# Prologue

Up until that day, I had been just an average high school girl, one you could find anywhere.

“Sorry!” my friend exclaimed. Her hands were clasped in front of her face, and she peeked out from behind them. “Can we postpone our weekend plans until next week?”

I smiled and nodded. “Sure, that’s fine with me. I don’t have anything going on next weekend.”

My friend let out a sigh of relief. “Thanks! My older sister is coming home this weekend. Ugh! I told her to give me a heads-up sooner.”

“Wasn’t your sister studying abroad?” I asked. “Where was she studying again? America?”

“Canada. She can barely speak English, but she still went. What the heck was she thinking?”

Though my friend was hurling insults at her sister, I knew she loved her dearly. It was so heartwarming to see her fidget restlessly, and a small laugh escaped from my lips. “She’s got an amazing drive,” I remarked. “To me, traveling to another country feels like going to a whole new world.”

“What’re you saying? Kanon, didn’t your cousin marry a foreigner?”

“My second cousin, not my cousin,” I clarified. “But we’ve basically never talked, and I’ve only met him twice!”

I had never thought about studying abroad or international marriage, and traveling overseas for fun hadn’t even crossed my mind as an option. Though I was interested in what went on in other countries, my curiosity was sated by TV and random videos.

My friend glanced at her phone to check the time and then suddenly yelled,



“Oh crap! My train’s gonna be here soon. All righty Kanon, see you later!” She waved her hand wildly behind her as she ran off.

“Yep, see you later.” I gave her a small wave back.

I sat down in one of the seats at the bus stop. The seat’s color was faded and it made a small creak when I put my weight on it. When I checked my phone, I saw that I had a few minutes before the bus arrived, so I decided to kill time on social media.

I just so happened to stop scrolling on a picture of a historical site in another country. A celebrity had uploaded the photo, which depicted numerous large stone pillars with the bright blue sky as a backdrop. The caption alongside the photo said, “I finally saw the real thing!” and then went on to describe the celebrity’s honest impressions of the site.

“Whoa...” I murmured. *Looks like some sort of temple...probably in Europe?*

*I really respect people who take action and don’t let their goals end as wishful thoughts. But in the end, I’m satisfied just seeing these things in pictures. Maybe I’ll tear myself away from Japan one day and go to a country far, far away...but that’s not happening today. I’m happy with my leisurely and peaceful life here, though I’ll admit it’s a bit restrictive.*

That’s what I had been thinking. And then, I suddenly blacked out.

It was just for a brief moment, a small gap in my memory. I didn’t remember being sleepy, but perhaps the pleasant weather lulled me into a lapse of consciousness. Then, when I opened my eyes to check my phone for the time, I was subsequently welcomed by a flash of dazzling light.

“Huh...?”

It was so bright that I immediately shut my eyes once more. My brain felt like it was shaking, like I’d lost all sense of balance. I managed to put strength into my wobbly legs and stabilize myself, though I kept my eyes closed and waited for the dizziness to pass.

But then, a stream of doubts surfaced in my mind. *Wait a sec, is this vertigo? Wasn’t I just sitting? Hold on, where’s my phone? I can’t find my bag either...*



Fear and confusion gradually consumed me. *Well, the situation won't improve if I stand here and do nothing.* Gingerly, I opened my eyes. The glaring light from earlier was gone, and my blurred vision slowly refocused.

"Eh...?" A confused noise escaped from my mouth.

The scene looked vaguely reminiscent of the picture I'd just been staring at on my feed, but it was still very, very different. Before my eyes stood several evenly spaced stone pillars, and there was light flooding through stained glass. The floor was stone, and something was drawn upon it...something that looked like a magic circle.

This building was so beautiful that it could've been designated as a World Heritage Site, but it didn't look old or decrepit at all. Also, the architecture seemed vaguely European, but I got this unsettling feeling that it wasn't from *my world*.

*It looks like a temple from a fantasy land,* I thought in the back of my mind.

Suddenly, a warm, gentle voice filled my ears. "Welcome."

A tall and lean young man stood before me. He had a chiseled nose, black hair that was tinged with blue, and black almond-shaped eyes that shared the same mysterious blue tint. His white robes, which looked like a priest's, were embroidered with gold thread at the hems and cuffs. The stole hanging around his neck was also gold, but it did not give off a boorish impression. His archaic smile had an air of elegance.

The young man knelt before me, reverently lowering his head. "We have been awaiting your arrival, shrine maiden from another world."

"Excuse me...?" His words seemed incomprehensible. *What does he mean by "shrine maiden"? He's not talking about me, right? And did he just say "another world"? I must've misheard. Please...tell me he just misspoke.*

"Where...? Where am I?" My voice shook with the words. "Th-This is Earth, isn't it?"

The young man smiled beautifully at me.

*"Welcome to the Hidden World."*

# The Reincarnated Princess's Performance

We left the temple, and none of us spoke a single word until we exited the forest.

*Everyone's fatigued and it's frigid outside, but those aren't the only reasons... Perhaps silence is the most telling method of communication for our emotions right now.*

The early morning air was cold and clear. By the time we reached our horses, which were waiting for us by the edge of the woods, the eastern sky had begun to lighten. The silence was prominent and somehow earsplitting—it felt like all life besides us had vanished from the world. Sunlight was slowly beginning to peek above the horizon, as if the shining rays were washing away the darkness. It was such a beautiful landscape that, for some reason, I almost wanted to cry.

After we cleared the tree line, Ratte twitched as if reacting to a noise. Then, in a low voice, he said, "Someone's approaching."

Sir Leonhart was already turning the moment Ratte whispered to the rest of us. Captain Lieber also moved in the same direction, only one step behind. I didn't really know what was going on, but I followed everyone's gaze.

Upon the hill, there was a small dark shape moving toward us, and we could hear the rumble of hooves loudly stamping the ground. Once the figure rode near enough, he slipped off his horse and sprinted in our direction. As he drew closer, we identified him as Sergeant Pascal, a member of the border patrol.

"Captain, I finally found you!" Sergeant Pascal knelt in front of Captain Lieber, panting heavily. He looked like he was at the end of his rope, so we easily inferred that this was no trivial matter. Everyone tensed up in nervous anticipation.

Sergeant Pascal was breathing so heavily that his shoulders were heaving. However, the words he huffed out froze the air over. "We received an urgent message from the fortress! Please...return to your home. Your wife is...!" His



voice trailed off as he gasped for breath.

He didn't need to finish—we all knew the words that would follow. *If the captain betrayed us to save his wife's life, then she likely doesn't have long to live...*

We all turned our attention to Captain Lieber.

He stood motionlessly, eyes downcast, until finally he murmured, "I see." He stood there, unperturbed, and nodded once. I couldn't read what he was thinking or feeling from the expression on his face. Sergeant Pascal stared at his captain, bewildered by how calmly he was reacting.

*It seems that Captain Lieber has steeled his resolve. Is that why he can remain calm?* However, my shallow observation quickly disappeared when I gave him a closer look—Captain Lieber was clenching his hands tightly and shaking.

*Resolve? What am I thinking? Of course not. The love of his life is on death's door, and anyone would be agitated under those circumstances. He's obviously distressed, and I know he wants to jump on his horse and ride out immediately. But, at the same time, Captain Lieber must understand that he does not have the right to do so.*

"Captain?" Sergeant Pascal called to him questioningly, but Captain Lieber remained still. *No, he can't move. He doesn't have the power to make a decision because he's a criminal. Right now, the one highest on the totem pole is me. I'm the one who must make the decision.*

"Lady Mary." Sir Leonhart turned to me. There was not a single drop of hesitation in his eyes as he faced me, and I could imagine the words he was about to say. The kind Sir Leonhart would never let me bear the burden alone. *He'll gladly volunteer himself to be hated...*

*But I won't allow that,* I thought instantly.

Sir Leonhart continued, "We should return to the for—"

"I-I'm...I'm tired!" I sputtered, interrupting. I knew he was going to play the bad guy and suggest that we should return to the fortress as planned. So, in my panic, I'd yelled over him.

*I know I couldn't think up a good excuse, but this one is just terrible. I want to hold my head down in shame...but I need to save the regret for later!*

“Um, er...” I watched Sir Leonhart’s eyes grow wide in confusion as I frantically searched for what to say next. “I’m tired, so I don’t want to move anymore.”





Sir Leonhart paused for a moment. “I...will support you while we ride, so please lean on me and rest. It will take us a while to reach the fortress, but I will ride as smoothly as possible. I apologize, but please endure for a little longer.”

“Oh, really?” Sir Leonhart’s reasonable proposal swayed me for a moment, but I managed (barely) to fight off my desire to agree. “Ah, no! I mean, I want to lie in bed as soon as possible!”

*That was close...very close. I was almost tempted by the opportunity to stick tightly to Sir Leonhart.* Captain Lieber and Sergeant Pascal were watching our sudden squabble, and they seemed flabbergasted. *They’re not following at all,* I silently mused. The only ones who had caught on to what I was planning were Sir Leonhart, who looked troubled, and Ratte, who seemed to be enjoying our little exchange.

“But...” I continued, “the inns located in the nearby town won’t be open yet. Hmmm, what should we do?” I put my hand on my cheek, pretending to think. Ratte covered his mouth and coughed.

*Hey! You there, mister! Don’t you dare laugh or else they’ll figure it out. You’re not fooling anyone with a fake cough. My feelings are hurt because you laughed at my lousy acting, but the show must go on.*

I gently hit my palm with my fist as if a light bulb had just gone off in my head. “Oh, yes! Captain Lieber, isn’t your home closer to our current location than the fortress?”

Captain Lieber’s eyes widened, finally understanding my intentions. His mouth was slightly open and shaking—the shock of my suggestion had evidently hit him hard.

*He probably thought he’d never see his wife again, regardless of the outcome. That’s the obvious conclusion when you consider the weight of his crimes. After all, he’s a heinous man who betrayed his own country, and I know I should handcuff him and bring him back to the capital ASAP. As a member of the royal family, I should cast off any personal feelings; it doesn’t matter who he is or what complicated situation he’s in. I know that’s what I must do, but...*

I cried out from my heart, not as a princess, but as the normal little girl



Rosemary. *If Captain Lieber and his wife are separated here, I'll regret it for the rest of my life.*

"May we take a short rest there?" I asked the captain. *I can't give you long with only my decision, but if I don't do anything...you'll be separated from your wife forever. And that would be too cruel.*

Captain Lieber's face was contorted with distress. He pursed his lips, bowed deeply, and rasped out, "Thank you. Thank you very much."

His words were quiet, but I heard them clearly enough. However, to keep up the act, I tilted my head, pretending like I hadn't caught on. *In this scene I'm playing, Captain Lieber is being forced to obey the whimsical demands of a princess—it would be strange for him to thank someone who's selfishly throwing a tantrum for a place to rest.*

I looked up to Sir Leonhart next to me and saw him frowning. In a quiet voice only I could hear, he whispered, "You are too compassionate."

"*That's not true,*" I silently conveyed with a dry smile and a shake of my head. *I just want to prevent my future self from suffering. I bet my father will admonish me harshly when we return... He might even give me a punishment of some sort.*

*I doubt Captain Lieber will try to escape, but taking a detour without restraining him is definitely a big no-no. Though, strangely enough, I don't regret my decision.*

"What's this about?" I asked. "I'm just being selfish because I'm tired and want to sleep in a comfortable bed." I couldn't help but smile. *As usual, my acting is terrible.*

Sir Leonhart smiled wryly as if to say, "*You're really a hopeless one.*"

# The Reincarnated Princess's Anguish

We parted ways with Sergeant Pascal and made our way to Captain Lieber's residence as quickly as we could.

"Ugh." My body was in terrible condition due to fatigue and lack of sleep. Every time we lurched or swayed a bit too violently, I felt like throwing up, but each time, I forced myself to look up and swallow the urge (along with some cold air).

"Princess, how are you faring?" Sir Leonhart whispered right into my ear. I couldn't turn around to look at him, though I could imagine the concern on his face. However, I didn't want to complain.

"I'm fine."

I locked my eyes forward and tried to keep my voice as calm as possible, but he saw through my efforts to conceal my exhaustion. A large hand covered my own, giving me an encouraging squeeze before letting go.

It was no lie that Captain Lieber's home was closer than the fortress, but at this moment, it felt unbelievably far away. The sun—which had barely been peeking over the horizon—was now ascending high in the sky. I could see smoke rising from the scattered homes of the people who had begun cooking.

As we witnessed the signs of people going about their day, it forced us to acknowledge the passage of time...much to our displeasure. *I know I'm not the only one feeling impatient as the hours fly by.*

We were trotting down a road that was surrounded by vast fields when finally, a lone house came into view. It was a quaint little country home, as well as our destination.

As soon as we arrived, Captain Lieber leaped off of his horse and ran toward the house. His hustle was surprising, and I could feel his impatience rubbing off on me as Sir Leonhart helped me down from the horse.

"Ratte, you..." I searched for the right words to say.



“I’ll wait with the horses and hold down the fort here.” He smiled, waving us on. Sir Leonhart and I left the reins with him and followed after Captain Lieber.

“I’m back!” Captain Lieber announced. He opened the door without waiting for a reply and entered his home. His frenzied footsteps and booming voice were the only sounds that echoed within the house. It was awfully quiet; there was practically no sign of human life inside.

My heartbeat was annoyingly loud in contrast to the silence within his abode. A shiver ran down my spine, and for some reason, I felt unsettled.

“Sven, are you here?!” Captain Lieber continued to yell, hoping for any sign of activity.

After numerous cries, we heard a weak voice call out, “Master...”

A thin gentleman who looked to be in his sixties appeared before us. He had white hair that was tidily combed back, and he was wearing butler attire.

“Sven! Where is Tiana?!” Captain Lieber grabbed the butler’s thin shoulders and hounded him for answers.

The man named Sven looked down to the floor, as if he were trying to escape Captain Lieber’s gaze. Dark shadows obscured his deeply wrinkled eyes, and I couldn’t quite make out his expression. However, I could see his dry, cracked lips quivering.

“Madam has...” he began, his voice trembling with his lips.

We were hesitant to ask for him to continue, fearing the words that had been left unsaid. *Are we too late?* My brain was not working properly, so my emotions led me to the simplest conclusion. And, consequently, the cruelest one.

We could now hear sobbing coming from one of the rooms within the house. Several women, whom I presumed to be servants of the household, exited the room in a close huddle. This series of events only confirmed my suspicion, and it was insinuated as clearly as if an adult were outlining the situation to a child.

*We didn’t make it in time.* Those words kept echoing inside of my mind over and over again. My eyes began to blur, and the world around me shook.

“Lady Mary!” Sir Leonhart held me up, preventing me from collapsing to the ground. His hand was ice-cold, and I looked up to see that his complexion was also white as a sheet.

“I’m fine,” I said stiffly. *This isn’t the time for fainting.* I forced myself to pull away from his body, which was supporting my own, and stood up on my own two feet.

I redirected my gaze to Captain Lieber, who was wordlessly standing stock-still. I couldn’t read what was going through his mind just by staring at his profile. He merely stood there, not out of serenity, but because he was in a daze.

I couldn’t tell how much time had passed. Had it been ten minutes? Thirty minutes? Or only a few seconds?

Captain Lieber was the first to break the silence. “I see,” he calmly murmured, his demeanor still fully composed. He patted Sven on the shoulder as if to console him. “I’ll go see my wife—I’ll go see Tinny.”

Captain Lieber swayed listlessly as he walked past the group of women and entered the room. I couldn’t think of any words that might ease his pain.

“I apologize for the lack of hospitality...” Sven, the butler, said after a moment, snapping Sir Leonhart and me out of our dazed stupors. “I shall prepare some refreshments. Please, come this way.”

I returned to my senses and shook my head, feeling flustered. “Please, don’t mind us.” I tried to give him a firm refusal, but a smile formed on Sven’s pale face. His red, swollen eyes were saying, *“I’ll feel better if I’m working. It’ll distract me from my grief.”* I couldn’t bring myself to decline any further.

Absentmindedly, I glanced around the room he’d taken us to. Light-colored wooden beams lined the white plaster walls. The windows were fitted with wooden shutters that opened outward from the middle, and these were decorated with latticework. Curtains made of thick cloth were hung over the windows, patterned with little flowers and lace. Several porcelain dolls were lined up on the shelf above the brick fireplace, and dried flowers tied together with pretty strings decorated the room.

It felt like I was in a charming house straight out of a fairy tale rather than in a noble's mansion. This place was filled with things that women would adore, both inside and outside the building.

*Captain Lieber must've collected an assortment of things that his wife liked. It also looks like they employ the minimum number of household staff. I'm sure this home was built for his wife to live in peace—a castle just for her.*

"Princess." Sir Leonhart called to me softly, trying not to surprise me. He took my hand, guiding me over to the sofa. "Let's sit down."

I followed his lead and took a seat. The sofa was covered in a beige, floral-patterned cloth. There was also a matching walnut-colored coffee table with cabriole legs. All the furniture was small and cute, and the decor had lovely, florid patterns.

Everywhere I looked, the room was covered in items that did not suit Captain Lieber's image, not in the slightest. But...that was exactly why any visitor could tell that he was overflowing with love for his wife.

A strangled hiccup escaped from me. My eyes were hot, and I gripped my hands tightly in an attempt to push the tears back. Was I sad? Distressed? Or was I angry? I couldn't get a grasp on my own feelings.

*I don't think what I did was wrong—his wife's survival should never have depended on the demon lord. But seeing all of these little signs of affection shakes me to the core. Wasn't there something I could've done? Is there really nothing I can do?*

"Princess." Sir Leonhart knelt before me on the floor. He peered into my downcast eyes and placed his hand atop mine, which I'd flopped onto the sofa. He gently pried open my fingers as if to reprimand my nails for digging into my palms. Then, he intertwined his fingers with mine, tangling our hands together.

"You did the best you could," he said.

I let out another small hiccup.

Sir Leonhart's brows drooped, and his expression became troubled. "Stop blaming yourself every time someone gets hurt. You don't need to take it all on your shoulders. And stop telling yourself that there was more you could do. You



are much too hard on yourself.” He smiled at me bitterly.

Evidently, he’d picked up on the negative spiral of my thoughts.

“We don’t understand what pain or suffering Ernst is going through, nor do we know his wife’s feelings. The love they hold for one other...it’s theirs alone.” Sir Leonhart used his free hand to gently stroke my head.

The warmth from his hand unraveled the strings of my stubborn heart. *He’s right. It’s arrogant of me to presume that there was more I could have done. And thinking that I could understand their pain is just self-centered of me. Nobody wants that.*

“What we can do now is quietly wait... That’s all,” Sir Leonhart said.

I nodded in response, sniffed, and lifted my hands to rub my eyes. Sir Leonhart’s gaze softened, and he wiped away the tears that were blurring my vision.

I usually felt conflicted when he treated me like a child or acted like he was my older brother, but this time, I was only comforted by his kind gesture.

# The Captain's Lament

*Oh...I didn't make it in time.*

When I saw how the servants reacted, I knew. However, my emotions didn't hit me immediately. It was as if the link connecting my mind and body had been severed. My heart was frail, unlike my conditioned body, so perhaps it was instinct to protect myself from these feelings.

That was how irreplaceable Tiana was to me.

I trudged to my wife's bedroom, as if some force was dragging my feet along. My senses felt dull. I couldn't control my limbs well, and everything looked blurred, as if my eyes were veiled by a silk curtain. The maids' weeping sounded distant.

Pulling the door open, I entered the room. Tiana's sweet scent hung in the air, intermingled with the smell of medicine. Dazzling rays of sunlight shone through the lace curtains. Several dolls modeled after rabbits and squirrels lined the ledge of the eastern bay window—their silhouettes looked like shadow puppets.

I noticed that there were more bundles of dry flowers and potpourri scattered around. The maids must have made them so that Tiana could enjoy her beloved flowers even in the winter. Unfinished floral embroidery and a bookmarked novel sat atop the bedside table.

All of these objects suggested that her daily routine would continue, as if there was not a shadow of a doubt that another ordinary day in her life was about to begin.

And yet, one thing was absent from the scene that I had become so used to.

My beloved wife lay peacefully in her canopied bed. Only her soul was missing.

"Tiana." I called out her name and swayed one step closer. "Tiana... Oh, Tinny."

No matter how many times I said her name, there was no answer. I reached out to shake her thin shoulders, feeling compelled to try and wake her, but I stopped myself. My body rejected the thought of touching her in this state.

“Tinny...” My hands grasped at empty air until they finally grabbed the back of the chair next to the bed. I tugged on it and sat down. The delicate wooden chair creaked, protesting my weight.

I gazed at Tinny’s profile. Faint rays of sunlight shone through the curtained windows and lit up her face. Her skin, as white as fresh snow, glistened in the light. That, paired with the shine of her perfectly smooth silver-blond hair splayed across her pillow, made her look like she was glowing.

Her lips were colorless and slightly open. Besides how pale she was, she looked the same as always. It was a cliché thought, but she appeared to be sleeping. Perhaps that was why my feelings hadn’t truly set in.

Her long lashes fluttered, and I almost thought she’d wake up. Her violet eyes would look at me once more, and she would say, “*Welcome back!*” as she smiled brightly. I couldn’t help but dream that it would happen.

I didn’t know how long I’d been sitting there, imagining she’d wake up again. I simply remained motionless, staring at Tinny.

Then, a reticent voice called out to me.

“Master.”

I didn’t bother turning to see who was standing beside me. The thought of raising my head to check was tiresome, so I merely glanced to the side, out of the corner of my eye. One of Tinny’s maids was there, someone Tinny had trusted immensely. She was a plump woman past her fifties who always wore a gentle smile on her face. Today, however, she looked like a withered flower. Her eyes were bright red and her complexion pallid.

“Madam entrusted this to me.” The maid took out a white envelope and handed it to me.

“This...is from Tinny?” I asked, staring at the maid and then at the envelope. She replied with a firm nod.



Once the letter was in my hands, she left the room with her head bowed.

*A letter from Tinny? For me? When did she write this?*

*I don't want to think about it, but she likely knew her time was near. So...I suppose she left a letter behind for her pathetic husband because she knew I couldn't live without her.*

It felt unbearable to even try to imagine what emotions she'd felt while composing this letter. *How terrified was she? How much pain did she feel while she wrote this?* I stared at the envelope in my hand, scared to open it.

*You can't run away,* I chided myself.

I slid my fingernail under the flap of the white envelope, and it easily parted. Inside were two sheets of white stationery folded into quarters and stacked on top of each other. I pulled the papers from the envelope, unfolded them, and smoothed out the creases.

The letter, written with beautiful and immaculate handwriting, began like this:

*"To my beloved husband, Ernst,"* I read aloud. The voice I heard was not my own hoarse one—I heard it in my head as Tinny's.

I could imagine her sitting up in bed writing this letter while occasionally looking out the window. The message went from a seasonal greeting to concerns for my health. It mentioned that it'd been "snowing for days," so she must've written it about a month ago.

My eyes, which had been reading each word with care, stopped at a single sentence.

*"If you are reading this letter, then that means I am no longer in this world."*

*Ah, just as I thought. Tinny knew her death was near. Acceptance and a huge wave of regret washed over me. I failed to make Tinny happy. I failed to realize such simple things because I was living my life in fear of her imminent death, and I let that fear wear me away. I even committed crimes, but in the end, I still couldn't save her. I couldn't even be there during her last moments.*

I was a harebrained fool.

My thoughts continued that way, disparaging, and I allowed insults to pile up like a mountain. However, Tinny had not written a single word blaming me. She'd simply written about her concern for my welfare and the like.

*Tinny. Tinny. Oh, my darling Tiana. I want you to blame me. I wish you'd never forgive me for making you suffer.* I prayed and turned to the second page.

Taking a deep breath, I read the first line. My eyes widened. It took my brain seconds, perhaps even minutes, to process the unexpected contents.

*"Knowing how serious you are, I'm sure you've read up to here with a solemn expression."*

I'd understood the beginning up until this point...but the rest of the line lost me. I read the next part aloud. *"But I wonder...what expression will you make when you've found out that this is the twentieth letter I've written?"*

*Twentieth? This letter that sounds like a final farewell...is the twentieth one?* Tinny's voice within the letter continued, as if she could see my confusion.

*"I decided to write to you because the doctor told me that I would not reach adulthood. The first letter I wrote to you was from a place where I thought I'd never see you again. I must admit, I'd felt like an actor in a tragedy. When I reread that letter, I was so embarrassed that I immediately tore it up and disposed of the remains. I even asked Marithé to burn the scraps along with the fallen leaves."*

Marithé was the maid who'd handed me this letter. When I saw the words "fallen leaves," trivial thoughts like *"Oh, she must've written that letter in the beginning of autumn"* flashed through my mind.

I was still confused—I couldn't keep up with how much the tone of her writing had shifted from the first page.

*"I think I wrote the second letter while I was more composed, but I'd written about a blizzard, so I tore it up and disposed of it again once the weather warmed. When I was writing the fifth letter, I realized, 'Why don't I avoid seasonal topics altogether?'"*

*You didn't think of that until the fifth iteration?* I thought. A chuckle inadvertently slipped out. That's right. Tinny had always looked like she was

levelheaded, but she'd been unexpectedly clumsy at certain things. One time, she'd baked me something sweet but had mixed up salt and sugar...though I'd still finished it all with a smile on my face.

I took up the letter again, reading aloud once more. ““But after a while, I gave up on deliberately avoiding seasonal topics in my letters. My goal had changed from writing you the perfect letter to seeing how many letters I could tear up and throw away.’ Huh...?” I was befuddled by her words. “Tinny, you always come up with the most unexpected things.”

She'd always appeared to be innocent and lovely, like a snow spirit that would melt if you touched her, but she'd been more than just a docile and sheltered noble lady. Tinny'd been brimming with curiosity and had been a sore loser. *Had her health been better, I'm sure she would've been a tomboy who could never stay still.*

*“You'd think that I'd quickly run out of topics to write about since I'm always cooped up inside. However, it's not that simple—I have plenty of reliable allies who help me all the time. In the winter, the gardener makes snow rabbits and decorates the outside of my window with them. In the spring, the maids gather flowers of all colors and care for them in vases. In the summer, the stable boy comes to my window and shows me the butterflies he's caught, and in the autumn, the chef makes delicious chestnut sweets. I never run out of things to write about. There are so many scenes I want to describe to you, so many things that I want to show you, that I'm actually troubled!”*

It was easy to visualize Tinny's gentle smile there. She'd always been smiling, and all of our servants adored her. That's why Tinny had always enjoyed every single day. Even though she'd been ill...and even though she'd been unable to get out of bed.

*Right, wasn't she all smiles every single day? Why did I think she suffered while she wrote this? Did my guilty conscience twist the truth? I betrayed my own country, and I tried to force an unnatural life onto Tinny without even asking for her opinion.*

Regret clouded my eyes.

*Tinny never despaired. She lived her life to the fullest.*

I understood that when I read the following line: *“I will tear up this letter too when the wildflowers bloom.”*

“Next time, I’ll write a love letter instead of a farewell letter. And instead of tearing it up, I’ll keep it...” I read this line aloud, but I was too choked up to voice the next words.

My hands shook. I’d unconsciously started clenching the letter too hard, causing creases to appear in the paper.

*“I’ll give it to you in the future when I’m an old lady sitting next to you.”* The moment I read those words, I began sobbing. Guttural, beast-like sounds escaped from my throat.

“Tinny...! Tiana. Tiana...!” Tears streamed down my face and fell on the letter, blotting out the words. I clutched the message in my hand and finally reached out to touch Tinny. I held her slender, alabaster hand in both of mine and lamented.

*Tinny never gave up on living. She was trying to enjoy life and all its wonders with all her might...right by my side.* I felt like just knowing that fact had saved my life.

*I’m glad I didn’t get here just for her last moments. It’s truly a blessing that I didn’t make it in time, that I didn’t force a life of eternal suffering onto the love of my life.*

I pressed Tinny’s cold hand against my forehead and continued bawling my eyes out like a child.





# The Reincarnated Princess's Confusion

It took less than an hour before the heart-wrenching wails—which had made our own hearts tighten sorrowfully in our chests—ceased. Captain Lieber came to the room where we'd been waiting. Without bothering to hide his swollen eyes, he bowed his head before me.

"My apologies for keeping you," he said.

His bright-red eyes were pitiful, but he looked like he'd calmed down. It seemed that the hesitation that'd been plaguing him had disappeared, though that was probably just my imagination. Rather than despair, his dignified countenance seemed to be filled with something akin to resolve.

"Let's go," he stated.

"Are you sure?" I asked, but immediately, I realized my mistake. *It doesn't matter if he's sure or not. I can't give him any more time with the authority I hold.* Even so, I couldn't bear to make him leave without asking. *He won't be able to attend his own wife's funeral. That's too heartbreaking.*

Captain Lieber nodded his head slowly as if he'd read my thoughts. "I've finished saying farewell. I'll leave the rest to my reliable servants."

Sir Leonhart had kept quiet up until now, but when he spoke up, it was with brevity. "Did you explain the situation to them?"

*Good point. I've been thinking about that on top of his absence from his wife's funeral. He won't be able to reside in this house any longer, even if his punishment is lighter than expected.*

"I informed two people. They will act as my representatives. When I told Tiana's maid, she gave me a good wallop too," Captain Lieber replied with a wry smile.

Upon closer examination, his cheek did look a bit flushed. I hadn't initially noticed because of how puffy and red his eyes were from crying.

*I'm surprised a servant would raise their hand at their master, but considering how everyone in this household seems to act like family, I suppose it's not that outlandish. It doesn't matter if you're the master of the house; you'll be admonished if you've done something wrong. In a way, that's the ideal master-servant relationship.*

"Serves you right." Sir Leonhart crossed his arms and turned away with an audible "hmph." Then, in a quiet whisper, he added, "You need to reflect properly on the importance of what you were about to throw away."

Captain Lieber's eyes widened slightly and then softened. "Indeed I do," he said with a faint smile. It was an expression mixed with joy and sorrow. After concealing his smile, Captain Lieber turned to me, and I tilted my head to the side in response.

"Your Highness."

I instinctively straightened my back due to his formal demeanor. He looked straight at me and then bowed deeply.

"Huh?" Confused by his action, I looked to Sir Leonhart for help. He was scrutinizing Captain Lieber with a stern expression. My eyes wandered back to the captain, and, as if he knew my attention had settled back on him, he spoke once more.

"I cannot thank you enough for stopping me."

Caught off guard, my eyes widened in surprise.

"I was a fool. My actions have harmed many. However, thanks to your intervention, I didn't take the last step. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you."

"I-I didn't do anything particularly praiseworthy," I countered, denying his words. *I feel like my actions have been extremely glorified... I'm pretty sure the only thing I did was snap and rant at him. I did ask him to stop, but that's about it. At the end of the day, what I was most angry about wasn't that he betrayed the country or that he wanted to use the demon lord for his own self-interest—I was infuriated that he wanted to hurt Sir Leonhart.*

*So, given all that, I don't understand why you're thanking a little girl with*

*romance for brains who threw a hysterical fit.*

Under the weight of his gratitude, my face paled, and I shook my head and hands furiously.

Captain Lieber's eyes softened at my response. "You were remarkably brave. Frankly, I was mesmerized by you."

*I sincerely wish you'd stop bringing up that moment in front of Sir Leonhart.*

"Your Highness, I regained my senses thanks to you and my wife," he said. "I promise I will never do anything stupid again."

"Captain Lieber..." I murmured.

*Was he able to exchange a few words with his wife? Even if only for a few moments? It would've been impossible for them to have spoken, but they must've found a way to reach each other's heart somehow.*

Captain Lieber's face was still marked with anguish, but his eyes were honest—I knew he wasn't lying.

"Also, Leonhart."

"What is it?" Sir Leonhart replied in a dour tone.

*He said that he'd never forgive Captain Lieber for the rest of his life, but he can't bring himself to ignore his friend. I knew it. Sir Leonhart really is kindhearted.*

"From now on, no matter what happens, I will live until my last breath," Captain Lieber declared. "I will not selfishly take my own life...and I'd be happy if you would be there to watch me until the end."

Sir Leonhart fell silent for a moment. Then, eyes lowered, he nodded his head.

After that, we reconvened with Ratte outside and rushed back to the fortress. I didn't know how Captain Lieber would be handled, but he would no longer be the leader of the border defense force. There would likely be a drastic reshuffling of positions in the near future, but until then, we needed to temporarily entrust the defense of the fortress to the second-in-command, Vice-captain Walter.



Which, of course, also meant that we needed to fill Vice-captain Walter in on the details.

*I know. It's something that must be done. But it hurts to think about how Captain Lieber will feel when he must report his own betrayal to his subordinate... Imagining how Vice-captain Walter will feel when he finds out is also quite painful.*

I was an outsider to the matters of the fortress, but my stomach started grumbling in pain on the way there. Visions of the imminent turmoil played through my mind and made me secretly rub my stomach.

However, right when the fortress came into view, we ran into unexpected trouble.

We were about to pass through the woods on the main road when suddenly, Ratte and Sir Leonhart reached for their weapons practically at the same time. Captain Lieber also reacted, a few seconds slower, but he, too, readied himself.

We heard a sharp noise that sounded like wind being sliced through.

"Lady Mary!" Sir Leonhart pulled me close to shield my body. I felt disoriented, unable to keep up with the series of events. Horses brayed around us, and I heard the sound of swords being drawn. Then, I felt the presence of someone running past us.

I finally concluded that we were under enemy attack and I peered up to check on my surroundings. An unknown figure was wearing a black cape, which was flapping behind them—this assailant was attacking Ratte.

*Why are they going after him?* I wondered. The battle unfolding before me was so unexpected that it threw my mind into confusion. Ratte had managed to jump off his horse, and the attacker slashed at him with a knife. However, Ratte sidestepped the attack and drew out his own knife.

"How odd," Ratte remarked. "I cleaned up all the stragglers, so I thought it'd take them longer to regroup, even after they sent pursuers." His bitter smile seemed to say, *"Oops, my mistake,"* though his tone was so nonchalant that you wouldn't have thought his life was in danger.

The attacker ignored Ratte's small talk and wordlessly continued their

onslaught. Ratte deftly fended off all of the attacks. I thought to look toward Sir Leonhart for help, but even an amateur like me could tell that Ratte was skilled, so I only watched over him.

*The assailant's attacks are awfully fast—any one of them would be fatal if Ratte dodged even a second too slowly. But Ratte isn't even close to breaking a sweat, so he'll probably be all right,* I thought, somewhat irresponsibly.

“Still, this kinda feels like old times. Am I imagining things?” Ratte wondered. With a light flick of his knife, Ratte grazed the assailant's hood, causing it to fall away and revealing a head of lustrous black hair beneath.

“I wish it were just your imagination, but this is where we say goodbye for good, Ratte!” shouted a familiar voice. And, if my eyes weren't mistaken, I also recognized the attacker's back.

*Come to think of it, they knew each other in the game too... But why is he attacking Ratte?* My brain wasn't working at full capacity, so it was difficult to process all the information being thrown at me all at once.

Regardless, I knew I had to stop them.

“Stop, Crow!” I called out. “This is all a misunderstanding!” I had no idea what misunderstanding there could possibly be, but I just shouted anyway.

# The Reincarnated Princess's Arbitration

Crow froze for a split second, but then he immediately resumed his assault as if I'd said nothing at all.

*Huh? He ignored me?! Did you just ignore me?! I thought indignantly.*

"Hello, Crow?! I'm telling you it's all just a misunderstanding!" I yelled again, flustered.

But my pleas fell on deaf ears. "Don't worry. It's not a misunderstanding," he assured me.

*Hey! What do you mean it's not a misunderstanding?! I didn't even know what I meant when I said it!*

"What isn't a misunderstanding?!" I shouted.

Crow responded with a spectacularly snappy comeback. "Figure that out yourself."

Our conversation played out like a poorly written comedy sketch. We must've sounded silly to onlookers, but I earnestly contemplated his words.

*That's right. I initiated the conversation, so I should think of a solution,* I thought, working off the foundation that his response was completely reasonable. Unfortunately, no one pointed out how much of a farce our exchange was. I held up my hand to try and discourage Crow from attacking while I desperately racked my brain for ideas.

"Um. Uh. Ratte isn't our enemy... Yes, that's right! He's not our enemy!" I fumbled out.

"Rejected," Crow said flatly, without hesitation.

"Whaaat?!" I cried out.

*You're the one who told me to figure it out and that's what I came up with after putting on my thinking cap!!!*

“You’ve got a short temper as always,” Ratte said, exasperated, as he blocked Crow’s knife again. “Why don’t you hear what the princess has to say?”

*Ratte, you sound as if you’re an outsider stepping in because you can’t bear to watch anymore, but you’re very much involved in this, okay?! Actually, this is definitely ninety percent your fault!*

“I don’t need to hear her out. You’re the root of all evil anyway.” Crow pushed down harder with his blade. He glared at Ratte and the look in his sharp eyes clearly said, *“I just want to drive my knife into that smile of yours.”*

“Well, I guess you’re not strictly wrong.” Ratte let out an empty laugh, and as soon as he did, I thought I heard a snapping noise. It was probably the sound of Crow’s patience reaching its limit.

“I’ll kill you,” growled Crow in a low voice.

I screamed inaudibly. *Ratte, why are you provoking him?! You’re definitely enjoying yourself, aren’t you?!*

Sir Leonhart was apparently unable to bear seeing me so distressed. “Princess...shall I stop them?” Captain Lieber, who’d been silently watching over their scuffle, nodded in agreement.

*Maybe two of the most acclaimed knights in this country will be able to stop them... I hope.*

I shook my head slowly.

“Are you sure?” Sir Leonhart asked, trying to confirm once more.

“It kind of looks like they’re having fun playing with each other,” I replied.

Unable to let my comment slide, Crow angrily inserted himself into our little exchange. “Stop! Don’t say that.”

He was finally looking at me so I let out a sigh. “Then you stop too. Listen to what I have to say.”

Crow didn’t reply, but he did reluctantly lower his knife. I ignored the displeasure shooting out of his eyes. *I wasn’t trying to get back at you...probably.*



Ratte sheathed his knife and looked between Crow and me with great interest. A lighthearted whistle came from his shapely lips. “You’re amazing, Princess. You’ve got a good hold on his reins.”

Because of my fatigue, a scathing remark slipped from my mouth. “You should get your eyes checked by a doctor if that’s what it looks like to you.”

Unperturbed by my ire, Ratte smiled cheerfully. “Just as I’d expect from my master.”

Hearing those words come from that giant smile made me look down and hold my hand over my forehead. *He’s definitely doing this on purpose, I bemoaned internally. I know he can read the room, but he just chooses not to. Please, fix that about yourself.*

“What?” Crow uttered. His voice rumbled like a quake from the deep depths of the earth.

*Scary... I didn’t look at him, but I knew he’d turned that menacing aura on me. Wow, I can feel the intimidation from here. Did our spy journey across the great ocean to master haki or something?*

I glanced in Crow’s direction and saw a half smile plastered on his face. However, it was not a smile of tired resignation nor one of exasperation—it was the first smile of its kind I’d ever seen. *Ah yes, how to put it? That’s...that’s a threatening smile.*

His ruby-colored eyes were devoid of cheer, and they conveyed his feelings much more eloquently than his mouth.

*What the hell have you been up to, Crow? I took my eyes off of you for just a little while! What kinds of things have you been learning? I’m often told that I’m obtuse...but I know I’m accurately reading Crow’s emotions today. He’s scary... Super scary.*

A pitiful squeak of fear escaped from my throat.

Crow opened his mouth to address me. “Hey there, miss.”

*Hah. That’s strange. He normally calls me “Princess,”* I thought, trying to escape from reality. Not that it had much effect...

“Care to explain what he’s talking about?” Crow’s question seemed like an interrogation.

Feeling intimidated, I shrank back a bit. “Yes...” My voice faded into a muted whisper.

## A Certain Spy's Contrition

After we moved to the fortress, the captain of the border defense force and the captain of the royal guard left me, the princess, and that heinous Ratte in a room together. The captain of the royal guard assigned me to protect the princess temporarily while he was away, and I received a brief rundown of what was going on in a room they'd prepared.

They explained how the princess had traveled all the way to the border on secret orders from His Majesty and what had occurred during their travels...as well as why my ever-smiling former colleague was alongside the princess.

"And that's why you're with this guy?" I asked, leaning back and staring down at the princess with my arms crossed.

The princess cowered. "Yes..." she replied in a tiny voice.

Judging by that meek and quiet demeanor, she'd sensed my displeasure. "Hey, miss," I said with a sigh.

The princess's small shoulders shook in surprise. "Yes...?" Her response was quiet, and her tone sounded unlike her usual self. Unfortunately for her, I had not even the slightest intention of turning a blind eye to her actions just because she looked pitiful.

"It's a good thing you didn't agree to hire that thing on the spot," I said.

"Huh?" She looked caught off guard by the conversation's unexpected direction.

The princess wasn't a young lady who knew nothing of the ways of the world. There were certain parts of her that were naive, but she understood her position and how much influence she had. She'd refrained from giving Ratte, an assassin from an enemy nation, an answer to his requests for employment—she knew letting him into the royal castle was a decision she could not make alone.

However, the problem was...that look on her face. It screamed, "*I can't abandon him because he helped me out!*" The princess always pursued her

ideals, but she also had a firm grasp of reality. I secretly liked that about her. I also did not mind her honesty.

But this time was a different story.

I calmly unfolded my arms and pointed at the door. “Put him back where you found him.”

“What!” she cried. “Don’t say that, mom! I-I mean, Crow!”

*Who’re you calling mom?!*

“No means no. I’ll probably end up having to take care of him anyway.”

“I’ll personally explain things to my father. He won’t bother you at all!”

*It felt like I was arguing with my daughter who’d brought home a stray dog. I really am going to turn into a mother at this rate. That won’t be funny.*

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the man in question shaking uncontrollably. Irritated, I ruffled my hair angrily. *That bastard... I heard him bark just now. I can tell he’s laughing. I want to turn him into mincemeat when the princess isn’t watching.*

“This guy’s an old acquaintance of mine,” I explained, tone firm. “And I know full well that he’s bad news. He’s only going to bring trouble, and he’s not someone you can handle.” I knew the princess had already figured out that we were acquainted—she’d heard me say his name—but I pointed it out again because I wanted her to understand how dangerous he really was. “You’ll end up in a world of pain if you let his gentle appearance fool you.”

“I don’t think he’s the gentleman his appearance leads people to believe.” The princess’s brows lowered and she smiled cynically.

My eyes widened with her words.

“That’s cruel to hear, Princess!” Ratte sniveled. “I’ve been trying to treat you like an honest gentleman.”

“Honest gentlemen do not test people,” the princess countered, shooting Ratte a cold look.

Ratte’s eyes narrowed in elation. He wore a look of satisfaction that I’d never

seen on his face before. “Then let me amend my statement. I swear I will be honest and faithful to only you from now on.”

The princess looked a bit astonished, but his words had a greater impact on me. Ratte didn’t needlessly tell lies—he used his kind visage to imply truth and let people keep their convenient misunderstandings.

He’d never say anything that would put him in an unfavorable position, and furthermore, he’d said *that*, regardless of whether the princess would understand the weight of his words. Which meant that they were directed at me rather than her.

He was telling me that he was earnest about serving her.

“As always, your personality is terrible,” I chastised, clicking my tongue.

Ratte smiled, one so pleasant that it looked shady. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Wow, how positive of you,” I muttered under my breath. He likely heard my sarcasm but ignored it. *He really is a sly fox.* I cast my eyes down and released my irritation with a sigh. “Miss...”

“Yes?” the princess replied.

“I’ll take care of this guy.”

The princess looked bewildered for a moment, but she quickly composed her expression to something with more dignity. I knew that she had correctly inferred the meaning behind my words, and it made me feel proud and bitter at the same time.

*What’s really sad is that I have to help the bug that is swarming around my country’s treasure.*

“However,” I continued, “whether he can return to you will depend on your father’s judgment.”

The princess bit her lips and looked down as if trying to shake off indecision. When she raised her head, she gazed at Ratte with solemn eyes. “I can’t promise that I’ll be able to fetch you. Is that acceptable?” It was unnecessary for her to say, but she was, as always, honest to a fault.



*Really, she's atrocious at bargaining. But...she's fine just like that. Her inexperience and virtue—the way her thoughtfulness contradicts her self-interest—those qualities are what draw people to her.*

Ratte didn't show a single sign of dissatisfaction. "Of course," he agreed coolly. "I'll prove that I'm a bargain to have, just you wait."

And thus, I undertook the task of transporting an extremely dangerous package—my former colleague. I entrusted the princess to the captain of the royal guard and headed back to the royal castle with Ratte.

I tied my report to the leg of my black-feathered partner and released him to the sky. He flew high into the air, then circled three times as if to confirm his location before disappearing into the distant sky.

"All right. Take good care of me, boss," Ratte said with a smirk.

I shot him a look.

*I want to just bury him and go home. Though, it would pollute Nevel if I just dumped him, so I'll thoroughly incinerate his body before disposing of it. I want to go home feeling fully refreshed.*

"Anyway, it's been a long time, Crow. I didn't think you were still alive."

"Thankfully, I managed. I'm delicate, unlike you. I bet you wouldn't die even if someone killed you."

"Ah ha ha! You're so funny! Forget about the old you—you're practically as impudent as I am now."

"Do you want to be murdered?" I growled, annoyed that he'd aptly returned my sarcasm.

*How much longer do I have to stay with this guy? Am I going to collapse from misery before we even get to the castle? I pondered for a moment. Yeah. I'd better just bury him here and go home. I'll just tell the princess that I did my utmost, but it was for naught. Then I'll catch a dog from around here and give it to her as a replacement. That should be good. Let's do that.*

"I don't think you can kill me yet," Ratte remarked with an aloof smile. The

atmosphere around him changed instantly.

He didn't mean that in a metaphorical sense—Ratte knew well enough that, emotionally, I was indeed ready to kill him. No, his statement was an unequivocal announcement that I was inferior to him in terms of skill. I truly wanted to end him.

“Just...drop dead already, useless old fart,” I spat out.

Ratte's eyes narrowed and his shady smile from earlier returned. “What an awful thing to say,” he whined, but there was no emotion in his tone.

*He really is infuriating. This risky thing can turn into a deadly poison with a single misstep. Why did the princess decide to pick it up?*

I suppressed my desire to sigh and lightly pressed my feet against my horse's sides, encouraging it forward. Ratte did the same and spurred his own horse on.

# The Reincarnated Princess's Gratitude

I'd planned to see Crow off before he left for the capital, but instead, he told me, "I'll take you to the captain of the royal guard."

We were merely moving rooms within the fortress, so at first, I thought he was being overprotective. However, I obediently complied when I remembered that I was in possession of the stone that sealed the demon lord.

"What about me?" Ratte asked, his usual smile spread across his face.

Crow glanced at him over his shoulder. "*Sit*. Stay right there. I'll toss you aside if you can't."

"Yessiiir," Ratte trilled nonchalantly.

Crow pushed my back forward without bothering to react. The two of us left Ratte in the room and headed toward Captain Lieber's office. When we arrived, we knocked on the solid doors, but no matter how long we waited, there was no response.

"Did they switch rooms?" I asked, turning to Crow, who was positioned diagonally behind me.

He shook his head. *Even if I can't hear anything, Crow's superior ears can probably pick up sound from inside the room...which means they're deep in conversation and simply didn't hear us knock.*

While I was vacillating between decisions, Crow nudged me forward. "Why not just enter?"

"But what if I interrupt the conversation...?"

"You have the right to be there," he said bluntly.

While I was busy being taken aback by Crow's wording, he took it upon himself to open the door. As it swung open, a loud *BAM* echoed out of the room, almost as if to cover up the sound of the creaking door hinges.

Before my eyes was Vice-captain Walter, his fist thrust out before him.

Captain Lieber stood tall right in front of him.

Vice-captain Walter's breath was as wild as a threatening beast—it was like he was trying to suppress his intense rage. The bright red swelling on Captain Lieber's right cheek made it evident that he had been punched, but even so, he stood before the vice-captain with his feet planted firmly on the ground.

Dumbfounded by what I was witnessing, I realized that I'd picked the wrong time to enter the room. *I saw something I shouldn't have. Yeah, I know, but what am I supposed to do now?*

The men didn't seem to have noticed me standing by the door, my posture upright and board-straight. They continued talking.

"I'm disappointed in you," Vice-captain Walter spat out. "I know you love your wife. I can understand why you'd give in to temptation, why you might cave to the devil whispering sweet promises to you just as you're about to lose her. But even so...even then, I can never forgive you. If you were going to readily abandon the soldiers who adore you, then why? Why'd you accept a position with such heavy responsibility?!"

He grabbed Captain Lieber's collar. "Your crime is not yours alone. His Majesty the King will pass a fair judgment. But that's not true for the vast majority of people. Do you really think a military order that was led by a traitor will be treated with respect in the future?"

His remark made me inadvertently gasp. I'd been naive and hadn't considered that...but it was just as the vice-captain had said: a person's lone action would sometimes be connected to the group of people they were associated with, and that person could affect the reputation of the whole group.

Unlike me, Captain Lieber did not lose his composure. Though his cheek was swollen and there was blood dripping from his lips, he silently met Vice-captain Walter's gaze head-on.

"Princess," Sir Leonhart said. I didn't know when he'd come up next to me, but he peered down, eyes filled with concern.

"Your Highness..." Vice-captain Walter's voice sounded choked when he noticed my presence.

“Why don’t you speak more quietly for now,” Crow said as he shut the door. “It’ll be bad if someone overhears.” Vice-captain Walter’s eyes lowered slightly and he let go of Captain Lieber.

An awkward silence fell over the room. The vice-captain’s gaze was fixed diagonally downward for a short while, and he seemed like he was dithering over something. Finally, he looked at me with determination.

I was mystified at first. *Why’s he staring at me?* Suddenly, he knelt down.

“Walter?”

He bowed his head with a pained expression. “I can make no justification for the betrayal of your trust, and no apology will ever be enough. Though I am vice-captain, I failed to notice anything unusual. I spent my time in a torpor. I am completely and utterly embarrassed by my failings. It is not a crime that can be atoned for, even if I offer my life to you, but I will humbly accept any punishment.”

“You did not commit any crime,” I said.

“Not so. I was ignorant of the betrayal that my superior was committing right next to me. My stupidity is unbecoming of a soldier. The responsibility falls on Ernst von Lieber and me, Isaac Walter. If you order me to behead this man and slit my own throat, it will be done with haste.” Vice-captain Walter immediately grabbed the hilt of his sword.

I paled and shook my head furiously. “Please stop!”

*I don’t want that at all! And honestly, I don’t want to see your heads detached from your bodies either.*

“Walter. Even if you were guilty, I am not the one who would pass judgment. Similarly, it is not your duty to pass judgment on Captain Lieber either.”

Vice-captain Walter’s head shot up and then he lowered his eyes in shame. “It...is just as you say. I was overtaken by my emotions. Please accept my apologies.”

This time, I calmly shook my head. *He’s usually a composed man, but his feelings got the best of him precisely because of his deep trust in Captain Lieber.*



*The vice-captain desperately wanted to protect his subordinates as well. I'm sure Captain Lieber, who's been standing over there suppressing his feelings with pursed lips, feels the same. He didn't try to justify his actions because he's aware that he betrayed the trust of his precious comrades.*

*It's probably arrogant of me to want to help them. I can't easily intervene in this problem, and there isn't much a little girl like me can do... Still, I don't want to let this end with a single apology.*

These two men hadn't tried to make a single excuse to save themselves, and I didn't want to just say, *"I wish I could help you, but that isn't a proper reason to do so."*

Instead, I glanced behind me. "Sir Leonhart. Crow."

Sir Leonhart, who was standing right by my side, gave me a little noise of affirmation, while Crow, who was leaning against the door, merely tilted his head to the side.

"Who else knows about this matter?" I asked.

Sir Leonhart replied to my sudden question without hesitation. "I forbade Ernst's servants from speaking of it. The two servants Ernst entrusted with his household have been serving him for a long time, so they will not divulge any information unless told to do so."

And then, as if the baton had been passed to him, Crow spoke up. "No information has been leaked to Lapter either. Ratte will keep his mouth shut, and it sounds like he eliminated all of Lapter's assassins. That man doesn't trust anyone besides himself in the first place anyway. No one is near this office either, so we haven't been overheard."

In other words, the only people who knew of Captain Lieber's betrayal were in this room.

As if he'd heard the quiet whispers within my heart, Crow peered at me with an icy stare. "You can't cover this up."

"I...know that." I'd almost faltered for a moment, but I had no intention of concealing the matter. *No matter how much I want to do something, there are still things I must not do. As a human and as royalty.*

Crow gave me a curt nod and broke into a satisfied smile as if to say, “*Well done.*” In the past, he always looked at me with testing eyes, but recently, he had been acting more like a parent educating their child.

“In all likelihood, the nature of Captain Lieber’s crimes will not be publicized throughout the nation,” I said.

Vice-captain Walter looked at me with wide eyes as I continued.

“Regardless of his punishment, his reported crime will be fabricated and will differ from the truth.”

If this incident were disclosed to the masses, not only would Captain Lieber’s family name be blemished, but the border defense force’s reputation would be seriously damaged. Nevel’s general safety could also be put at risk—it was possible that the truth behind Captain Lieber’s betrayal could have repercussions for the nation’s security, and it might lower people’s trust in our leadership. All of this meant that it would be against our best interests to announce the details of the incident. However, it would set a poor precedent if the captain were acquitted.

That being the case, Captain Lieber would be dealt with in secret, out of public view. Even if he were served the worst sentence possible, his death would likely be attributed to an illness or an accident.

“Then, that means...” The vice-captain’s quiet voice trailed off. “Our troops... They’ll be protected?”

Little by little, color began to return to his pale face. I watched him for a moment as he recovered from his despondent state. After some hesitation, I spoke once more. “Walter, you stated earlier that you had betrayed my trust, correct?”

“Yes.” His handsome, intellectual features twisted in pain.

*Oh no, I messed up. I didn’t bring that up to attack you!*

“It’s true that Captain Lieber was swayed. However, just once. He only wavered *once.*”

“Once or twice, it’s all the same,” the vice-captain replied stubbornly.

“That may be true. But, it’s also true that I never would have accomplished my mission without assistance from the both of you.”

Vice-captain Walter was not the only one taken aback by my words. Captain Lieber, who had thus far maintained his expressionless visage, now looked baffled and utterly shocked.

*It’s true. If Captain Lieber hadn’t investigated the Great Temple... If Vice-captain Walter hadn’t collected all those folk stories... Well, I never would’ve found the demon lord.*

“Besides, Nevel wouldn’t be able to live in peace without the border defense force protecting us,” I declared.

*Captain Lieber is a prominent military figure, and Lapter was kept in check by his command of the people in this fortress. We have no war brewing on our doorstep because the border defense force protects our land—we’re able to go about our lives without being driven into a wretched situation like the one that befell Nevel in Welcome to the Hidden World.*

“I cannot pretend that this single mistake did not happen,” I said. “But at the same time, your service and accomplishments cannot be disregarded either.” People might call my words lip service, but I truly wanted to convey these feelings. “You both have my deepest thanks for protecting us all.”

*Thank you for lending me all your help. Thank you for always protecting me. There are probably many other things I should thank you for. But, it’ll sound fake if I pile on anything else, so this is just about the right amount.*

“Princess...your kind words are wasted on us.” Two men’s equally hoarse voices overlapped at the same time.

“You’re as naive as always,” Crow remarked before walking out of the room. He was probably on his way to return to the capital.

Sir Leonhart smiled wordlessly. His dark eyes narrowed gently and his gaze resembled Crow’s a little, but strangely enough, I didn’t get the feeling that he was treating me like a child.

# The Reincarnated Princess Returns Home

The day after Crow left, we temporarily placed the border defense force in the hands of Vice-captain Walter and then departed for the royal capital. Once we arrived in the city, Crow showed up to take Captain Lieber away. I wanted to go with them, but I probably would not have been allowed to. I'd only be a hindrance.

I stared at Captain Lieber's back as he walked away, and Crow peered at me with a bitter smile. "Nothing will happen to him immediately, so don't make that face."

*I don't know what my expression looks like right now...but I probably seem pathetic.*

As if he wanted to poke fun at me, Crow added on, "It appears that *your* turn is tomorrow. I'd worry about yourself." He disappeared, leaving me with only those ominous words.

After that, Sir Leonhart escorted me to Klaus and then followed after Crow and Captain Lieber.

*I'm curious as to what happened to Ratte, but it sounds like that will be discussed tomorrow. I'd better just return to my room for now.* When I raised my head, I met Klaus's gaze. My personal guard, whom I hadn't seen for quite some time, was beaming at me, a huge smile on his face.

"Welcome back!" he exclaimed. His voice came out in a slightly higher pitch than normal; his eyes twinkled and his cheeks were flushed. I could practically see an illusory tail wagging vigorously behind him.

"I-I'm back...?" I replied, overwhelmed by his intensity.

Klaus's smile widened even further. "I've been eagerly counting the days and patiently waiting for your return. It is my greatest pleasure to serve as your personal guard once again."

I instinctively averted my gaze from his sickly sweet smile. It felt like my eyes

would burn if I looked at him directly. I hadn't even eaten anything, but I physically felt like I was suffering from heartburn.

*That's strange... I thought Klaus had completely settled down recently. Guess I was mistaken. Though, he didn't flare up at Sir Leonhart. Perhaps I'm just not used to Klaus's energy levels since I've been away for a while?*

I decided to ignore the other miscellaneous questions on my mind and jump straight to my main concern. "If you're returning as my guard, does that mean your body is fully recovered?"

Klaus's eyes began to smile with elation when I asked him that. His face practically melted, so much so that he lost the handsome features that made girls swoon. Where his face used to be, now there was only a pile of blissful mush. His smile looked like that of an old man watching his grandchild, and he might've given me some pocket money if I'd grinned and pleaded for some.

"You were worried for me?" he asked. "Thank you. But I'm in excellent condition now, and I can fight without any problems."

I nodded in response to these reliable-sounding words. Then suddenly, I remembered—*I don't need pocket money, but there is something I want to plead...er, I mean, talk to him about...*

While I was trying to find the right moment to bring up the subject, Klaus looked like he'd suddenly recalled something as well. "Lady Rosemary. There is a place I'd like to take you to before you return to your room."

"Hmm? Very well. If it would please you," I said in agreement.

*I was born and raised in this castle, so I wonder where he'd want to show me? Klaus would never bring me anywhere dangerous, so I can trust in that part of him. Though, I should bring up that before we get to wherever he's taking me.*

I let out a small cough, trying to make it seem like a thought had just crossed my mind. "Oh, yes, Klaus—there's something I'd like to discuss with you, though it's not decided yet."

"Yes?" he replied, eyes twinkling at me like a clingy puppy's.

*After being away from him for some time, the luminosity he exudes is truly*

*something else...* My eyes squinted a bit from the intense light he was radiating, but I continued to speak. "If I were to gain an additional guard..."

The moment I uttered those words, it felt like the temperature plummeted a few degrees. Goosebumps crept across my skin, and I swallowed the rest of the sentence. I cautiously peeked at Klaus. A smile was frozen on his face. Though I almost screamed, I just barely managed to hold it back.

*The sparkle in his eyes only looks like it disappeared because of an optical illusion. Yes, that's right! My eyes are just playing tricks on me. The angle of the light rays have merely changed. Yes, that's definitely it...*

"K-Klaus?" My voice trembled as I called his name. I took a step back, reassuring myself that everything was fine.

His verdant eyes narrowed into crescent moons. "I thought I was back in tip-top condition, but it seems that my ears aren't quite what they used to be. Could you repeat that one more time?"

I shook silently as I stared at Klaus's perfect smile. *Scary... What the heck, he's freaking scary! It feels like I've been bitten by a dog that was happily running around my feet. I don't need any yandere around me! Please, go dump that trait somewhere.*

"Lady Rosemary?" Klaus tilted his head slightly, his face devoid of his usual happy puppy features.

*Such a jarring change... It's kind of refreshing. No, wait, snap out of it! My usually pleasant guard is grinning like a wolf right now!*

I gulped and reprimanded myself for wanting to flee. *Nothing will be resolved if I run away here. Besides, he'll definitely catch me if I run away.* I took a deep breath then looked Klaus straight in the eye. "He's not quite the same as a guard, per se, but I may have gained an ally who will work with me."

As soon as I clarified that, the intense smile disappeared from Klaus's face. I blinked in surprise.

After a short pause to mull over my words, Klaus finally responded, his tone polite. "Understood."



“Huh?” *You threaten me with your smile and that’s all you have to say?!*

Seeing my confusion, Klaus merely smiled again in response. It wasn’t the same fearsome expression from earlier, but it wasn’t his usual smile either. It was calm and made him seem more mature.

“If he is your ally, then I have no reason to oppose,” he clarified.

“Klaus... You...” I murmured, feeling almost touched. *That’s something I would’ve liked to hear from the old you. I would have never expected to hear those words from someone who was in a perpetual tiff with my ally, Sir Leonhart.* In my heart, I criticized Klaus’s past actions, but I kept that to myself. If Klaus truly meant his words, then this was certainly an auspicious change.

“That is,” Klaus added, “on the condition that we confirm he’s truly and wholeheartedly on your side.”

“Ummm?” Feeling a disturbance in the air, I stopped walking.

Klaus was a few steps in front of me when he noticed I’d come to a halt. “Is something the matter?” He asked this as if there was nothing wrong with what he’d said. He wasn’t wearing the menacing smile—it was the normal Klaus. But that was even scarier.

“What do you mean by that?” I asked.

“What do I mean? Just as I said.” Klaus’s eyes widened, looking puzzled. “I can’t allow someone who doesn’t understand black from white to stay by your side. One questionable stray dog could tear your throat out.” He said this in a joking tone, but his eyes were not smiling. He followed up with a lighthearted laugh which caused my mouth to twitch.

*Klaus has certainly changed. It does seem like he puts my safety first and foremost now, and he’s stopped disregarding my will. By all accounts, he’s turned into a very reliable guard. But, I don’t know... How do I put it? Isn’t he way harder to handle now? I have a feeling Klaus and Ratte aren’t going to have good chemistry either, but maybe I’m just overthinking.*

When Ratte’s face floated through my mind, I unconsciously held my stomach. *Being surrounded by highly individualistic people isn’t anything new to me, so nothing will change if Ratte joins the fray.*

*It's fine! I'll be fine. Nothing to worry about...*

"Lady Rosemary?" Klaus called out. His eyes asked me, *"What's wrong?"*

An empty laugh escaped from my throat. *What's wrong? That's my line. What's wrong with you, Klaus? When did you transform into such a hazardous person to handle? Wait, no, he's always been like that. Just, the type of danger has changed...but he was always a dangerous one.*

I shook my head. "It's nothing."

Klaus looked at me questioningly but began walking once more.

I remembered that he was taking me somewhere, so I followed after him. We were moving quite far away from the central area. I thought he was leading me toward the greenhouse, but we veered off from that direction somewhere along the way. At this rate, we would soon end up outdoors.

I looked up at him. "Klaus, where are we going?"

Just as I spoke up, the voice of a young girl called out to me. "Lady Mary!"

I glanced in the direction of the voice and saw a petite girl hurtling toward me. Her light-brown skin was slightly flushed and her honey-colored eyes were sparkling. Her ash-gray hair had grown longer and was now swaying above her shoulders.

"Welcome back, Lady Mary!"

"Lily!" I cried out.

The girl who'd rushed toward me was Lily, a member of the Khuer tribe. I spread my arms out to welcome her, and after a moment of hesitation, she jumped into my embrace. I wrapped my arms around her slender body tightly and she returned my hug, albeit not as tight. I'd wanted to greet her upon her arrival at the capital, but she'd apparently beaten me to it.

"I'm back," I said with a smile.

Lily beamed at me in delight. *You've become much more expressive than when we first met.*

"I see you've made it to Nevel. Is everyone else with you?" I asked.

“Yes. We still need to transport medicine and tools as well as transplant the plants, so some people are making trips back and forth. But, ultimately, all of us will be moving here.”

*That’s a fortunate miscalculation. I thought at least half of the tribe would remain in their ancestral village, so it’s promising to hear that everyone is moving here. But knowing that the village will disappear...does make me feel conflicted. Because of my actions, many people’s lives are changing. I don’t regret my decisions, but I’m once again reminded of the weight of my responsibility.*

“Lady Mary?” Hearing Lily’s voice filled with concern brought me back from the recesses of my thoughts. “You must be exhausted. You’d better rest...”

“No, I’m fine,” I assured her. “I was just thinking that you’ve become more beautiful in the short time we’ve been apart.”

Lily’s cheeks reddened at my compliment. I really did think Lily had become beautiful. She’d always had graceful features, but her newfound expressiveness amplified her charm many times over.

“That’s not true at all!” Lily countered. “Ever since you cooked for us back in the village, my appetite has only increased. I’ve put on weight!”

*She has gained more meat on her bones, but Lily used to be too skinny. She’s still skinnier than the average person. The healthier she becomes, the closer she is to a belle appropriate for her age. I only feel proud to know that this is the result of my food and nutrition education!*

“Besides, Lady Mary, you’re the one who has become more beautiful.” Lily took a step back out of my embrace and looked me over from head to toe. “I always thought you were pretty when we lived together in the village, but you’ve become even more refined. You really are a princess...” She trailed off. “Oh! I shouldn’t act so familiar with you and call you Lady Mary anymore. I should address you as ‘Your Royal Highness’—”

Lily looked forlorn as she was speaking, so I interrupted her before she could make herself any sadder. “I’ll be in tears if you do that,” I objected firmly. “If you start speaking to me so formally, I’ll do nothing but weep all day.”

I gave her hands a little squeeze, causing Lily to blink at me in surprise. Soon after, she smiled at me like a blossoming flower.

“Then I’ll also keep calling you that,” piped up a familiar boyish voice from behind Lily.

“Permission not granted,” I stated. “If you don’t want to be imprisoned for *lèse-majesté*, then you’d better address me as Your Royal Highness.”

The brat—aka Rolf—popped up from behind Lily suddenly. “Why can Lily call you ‘Lady Mary’ but I have to call you ‘Your Royal Highness’?!” he complained.

“It’s a matter of intimacy,” I replied. *It’s because you called me ugly. Of course I’m not letting you off.*

“The three of you are as close as ever,” Wolf said out of nowhere, exasperation coloring his tone. He looked at Klaus, who was still standing behind me. “I see you brought Mary here. Thank you.”

“It wasn’t for you. I just thought it would please Lady Rosemary,” Klaus replied with a small *hmph*. He sounded like a tsundere.

*I see. Klaus knew I was worried about the Khuer tribe, so he brought me here.*

I turned to my guard. “Thank you, Klaus.”

Although I’d said basically the same thing as Wolf, Klaus replied to me with a radiant smile. “I am undeserving of your kind words.”

Unfazed by Klaus’s quick change in attitude, Wolf just smiled instead of getting angry.

*Klaus... It’d be best if you tried to conceal your true thoughts a little bit more.*

“Oh, by the way, Mary, I heard the intriguing idea you came up with. A medical facility where people can research and learn about medicine? It sounds like a dream!” Wolf gushed.

“I’m only an amateur suggesting whatever comes to mind,” I replied. “Other people will be handling the details. It will be everyone else’s job to make it a reality.”

“Absolutely! And it will be my pleasure to work on it,” Wolf said. His eyes

were twinkling, but they weren't the only ones; Lily's and Rolf's eyes were glistening with excitement as well. It looked like they were well on the path to becoming wonderful doctors.

"Since we're on the topic, is the facility going to be built in this area?" I asked.

"Apparently, it'll be constructed elsewhere," Wolf explained. "They'll be using this section for cultivating medicinal plants. They're preparing the soil now."

*I thought they'd build the hospital inside the castle grounds, but it sounds like it'll be somewhere else. Will it be erected in the castle town because it's intended to be open to the general public? But still, cultivating plants? I hope it works out.*

"Some plants won't take root if they're not in the right conditions," I pointed out. "I'm meeting my father tomorrow, so I'll request a thorough examination of the area as soon as possible."

"It looks like they're already doing that—there's no need to rush either," Wolf said.

*Of course. As always, father is swift when it comes to work. But what does he mean "there's no need to rush"? I find it doubtful that plants native to high altitudes would acclimate well to the environment in the royal capital.*

As if he'd gleaned my doubt from my face, Wolf stuck his head outside the building and beckoned someone over.

"What is it?" A slender young man wearing robes and holding a pot in his hands walked over. His eyes widened when he saw me. "Oh, Princess. Welcome back." The earth-affinity sorcerer lowered his brows and smiled at me gently. It was Michael von Diebolt.

Healed by his warm smile, I replied, "I'm home."

"He's amazing. He can easily raise any plant, regardless of how difficult it is to handle." Wolf slung his arm around Michael's neck and drew him close. Michael, who was uncomfortable with social interactions, looked like his eyes were swirling in surprise. I didn't stop Wolf though, since Michael didn't look like he hated the contact.

*That's right. Earth-affinity sorcerers don't only have the power to enhance a human's natural healing processes—they can hasten a plant's growth and help it flourish healthily. Michael's power alone is worth the force of a hundred men.*

It was heartwarming to see Wolf, Rolf, and Michael discussing the cultivation with enthusiasm. *Michael was always afraid to interact with other people because he possessed magical powers, but it looks like he's getting along excellently with the Khuer tribe.*

The words “magical powers” reminded me of two other people. Lutz and Teo's faces suddenly came to mind. *What are they doing right now? Before I departed for the far north, they'd looked terribly busy. I wonder if they've finished whatever it was that was keeping them so occupied.*

*I'll check in on them later, I thought silently.*



## A Certain Spy's Melancholy

I entered His Majesty's office accompanied by the captain of the border defense force.

"I've brought him," I reported.

Without looking up from his paperwork, His Majesty replied, tone calm, "I'll be with you shortly."

The royal guard captain had caught up to us and was now on standby in front of the door. We'd cleared the area, but it was good to have him keeping watch just in case.

I closed the doors behind me and leaned back against them, arms crossed in front of me. My appearance was slovenly, but His Majesty wasn't the type to care. Besides, there wasn't anyone else around to criticize me for being discourteous. The captain of the border defense force stood stiffly at attention, looking nervous.

"Sit down." His Majesty's long fingers pointed carelessly to the sofa in the room. The captain hesitated for a moment but did as ordered. I stayed put, thinking that it'd be fine if I remained standing. However, His Majesty said, "You too, Crow," so I reluctantly sat down next to the captain.

The only audible sound in the room was the scribbling of His Majesty's pen moving at a constant pace.

I had nothing better to do, so I spent the time impolitely staring at His Majesty's face. His silky, platinum-blond hair cast a light shadow over his fair visage. His light-blue eyes were crystal clear, and though they lacked any shine of emotion, that did not diminish his beauty. His features were so perfectly chiseled that he seemed more like a statue than a human.

*I used to think it was meaningless for a man to have an attractive face, but his beauty transcends gender... I can't help but admire him. Of course, not in an indecent way. It's like appreciating a piece of fine art.*

*The princess also has beautiful features, but she doesn't resemble him outside of her hair and eye colors. Probably because, unlike His Majesty, the princess is very expressive. If her beauty could be attributed to her overflowing vivacity, then His Majesty's is the exact opposite—his beauty reaches its zenith when he is absolutely still and silent. After all, if His Majesty utters a few words, his intensity greatly overshadows whatever beauty he has. No, he can instantly petrify most people with a mere glance.*

While I was absentmindedly ruminating on his beauty, I heard His Majesty put his pen down. "Thank you for your patience," he said aloofly. He walked over and sat on the sofa in front of us.

I could hear the captain gulp loudly, and he straightened his back even more. His Majesty looked him square in the eyes. "It's been a while, Lieber. Staying healthy?"

It was difficult to tell whether he was being sarcastic or not from his impassive expression and indifferent tone. *Well, he's greeting a traitor, so what else could something like "Hey, are you doing well?" be besides sarcasm?*

"Yes... It's been quite some time, Your Majesty. I have committed some foolish deeds. In spite of that, I am shamelessly still here alive before you." The captain admitted this with a solemn expression and then bowed deeply.

His Majesty looked bored. "You're not even going to offer up a single excuse?" he scoffed.

"No excuse can justify my actions," the captain responded. He was serious to a fault. "Though I was assigned to a critical location on our northern border, I am a pathetic traitor who allowed our enemies to win me over with their cajolery. I can only ask for your verdict."

"Don't be in such a hurry. You've become remarkably honest and upright in the short time since I last saw you." His Majesty folded his arms and sighed. "All of you have had your warped personalities reformed. Good grief—what kind of wild boar has managed to straighten all of you out?"

His Majesty's icy eyes looked right at me when he said "all of you." I had no recollection of my personality being reformed, but I subconsciously averted my eyes.

*I'd be lying if I said a certain girl who always recklessly charges headfirst into trouble didn't have any influence on me. Nevertheless, I thought Ernst von Lieber was a decent, honest man by nature, but it sounds like that was a false assumption... Well, now that His Majesty mentions it, it's hard to call a man upstanding if he would single-mindedly throw everything away for the woman he loves. "Twisted" might be a more proper descriptor.*

The corner of the captain's mouth tugged just slightly upward. "I was arrogant and selfish, but I came to my senses thanks to her. I saw great merit in her unflinching honesty."

When he heard the captain's words, wrinkles furrowed His Majesty's brow. "Would you still say so, knowing how many people have been manipulated by *that*?"

"It is her personal virtue."

"A personal virtue, you say?" His Majesty muttered with exasperation. "Well, let's leave it at that." His eyes lowered for a moment as if to switch gears. When he raised his light-blue eyes, the levelheaded gleam had fully returned. "If we were to do things properly, we would need a few days to procure a written statement of the evidence of your crimes before I made a decision on your judgment. However, considering your position and influence on those around you, we can't afford to take things at a leisurely pace. I want to settle this matter confidentially."

Just as the princess had predicted—His Majesty had no intention of making the captain's betrayal public knowledge. There was nothing good about advertising that a stronghold positioned on our border with an enemy nation had almost collapsed from the inside.

"I received a report of the incident, but I shall ask you directly." His Majesty took a breath and then continued. "Is it true that you've been colluding with Lapter spies and handing them information about our country?"

"Yes. Your report is correct." The captain meekly lowered his head.

His Majesty's eyes narrowed. "Then you, Ernst von Lieber, will be caught in an accident. During your mission to another country, your carriage will fall to the bottom of a ravine. Your death will be shrouded in secrecy." His Majesty

rendered this order without a single twitch.

I had expected this to happen...but the princess's face flashed across my mind and left me with a bitter aftertaste. *She understands her place and won't hold this against His Majesty—she will accept his decision. But...I'm sure she will be full of sorrow. She'll criticize herself for accepting his fate. She'll agonize over it.*

"As you wish," the captain replied immediately.

I resented his gallant spirit, but criticizing him was just barking up the wrong tree. He wasn't giving up on life. There was no other option but to obey. He'd replied instantly because he knew that the people around him would only suffer if he struggled.

The captain was so calm that one wouldn't have thought he'd just been given the death sentence.

"Very good. Crow, I'll leave this man to you."

"Yes...sir." For a moment I almost choked on my words. The days I'd spent in Nevel had been so peaceful that I had almost forgotten my role here.

*My hands were stained with blood long ago, I reprimanded myself internally. At this point, it doesn't matter who else I kill.*

I was sure that my expression had stayed as deadpan as usual. However, after looking at my face, the captain's brows drooped. "Your Majesty. I have a request, though I know it is impudent of me to ask for one."

Unoffended, His Majesty asked, "What is it?" and allowed the captain to continue.

"I do not wish to trouble anyone with my death. Please, allow me to finish what I started with my own hands. I will end my own life."

Those words were likely out of consideration for me. He knew that I would never be able to meet the princess's eyes again if I were to take his life.

*I'm pathetic. What am I allowing a dead man to say to me?*

"Your concern is unnecessary," I stated. "I will execute my duty without fail."

"But..." The captain looked at me, eyes filled with worry, even though I had

rejected his kindness.

*I wish I could tell him to mind his own hide.*

His Majesty looked at the two of us in turn and then furrowed his brows, seeming fed up. “What are you two talking about?”

I probably had a stupid look on my face when he said that. I turned to stare at the captain and met eyes filled with bewilderment.

“When did I tell you to die?” His Majesty scoffed. “I just said that the man named Ernst needed to be eliminated.”

“With all due respect, Your Majesty, could you please elaborate on the meaning behind your orders?” the captain asked, still perplexed.

“You will become a man with no name. Your rank, your family, your comrades—you will cast everything away. You will serve the Kingdom of Nevel from the shadows for the rest of your life.”

The captain’s eyes were wide with shock. I was also quite shaken by His Majesty’s verdict, but what I felt was nothing as extreme as what the captain was going through.

“Th-That would be... But isn’t that too compassionate a sentence for me?” the captain managed to wring out. His voice was hoarse and full of consternation.

“My decision is not out of pity for you.” His Majesty looked at the captain with his usual frigid gaze. “Killing you will not benefit our country. However, I can no longer allow you to hold an important position. And, because I cannot make this incident known to the public, reassigning you to a different location or dismissing you would be too difficult without a reasonable explanation. Therefore, the only option left is to work you to the bone for the rest of your life.”

When His Majesty finished explaining, he tacked something on in a voice that was a bit quieter. “Perfect timing. I wanted more pawns.”

“Pawn” and “work you to the bone”—His Majesty had used many crude words to describe the situation. In actuality, living on after discarding one’s whole identity was no easy feat. The captain would never see his precious

family or comrades again, nor would he have his own name to go by any longer. He would live life in solitude and die alone.

But even so...it was not the worst outcome. Everything ended if he died. But as long as he survived, there was a chance he could do something with his life. Working in the shadows, perhaps one day he might even protect those he cherished.

“If you desperately want to die, I won’t stop you,” said His Majesty. “So, what will you do? Will you become my spy?”

“I...humbly accept your offer.” The captain’s voice trembled, his face a crumpled mess.

# The Reincarnated Princess's Surprise

I yawned, not bothering to stifle it. Normally, I would've tried to hold it in, but it was late at night and I was currently in my own room. The only one watching was my adorable beloved cat, so no one would scold me for being immodest. *I'm only imagining that those big, round eyes are looking up at me with disgust. Yes...I'm sure it's just my imagination.*

I marked the page of the book I'd been reading and then placed it on top of the table.

*It's a bit soon for bed, but let's go to sleep early today. I'm exhausted from the journey home, but most importantly, tomorrow is going to be the most stressful, dreadful interview of my life. I need to restore my energy by playing with my cute Nero and sleeping in my warm bed.*

My shawl had been draped across my lap, and I pulled it over my shoulders, then sat down on my sofa. Nero ran to my feet without needing to be called and rubbed his head against my ankle. I scooped up my precious little cat but then...froze.

I stole a glance at the small box that was sitting atop the table. Inside that little box was a stone the size of my palm that I had obtained with much difficulty.

*I can't just leave it there in that box, can I...? But it's also not something I want to keep close at hand all the time. And...I feel like I'll have nightmares if I leave it by my bed. I wanted to give it to Crow to pass off to my father, but the fact that he didn't ask for it probably meant that I should hold onto it until tomorrow's meeting.*

I spent a long while glowering at the little box until finally, encouraged by Nero's meowing, I steeled my resolve for the night. Grabbing the box, I headed to bed.

*It'll be for one night only. Just put up with it for one night.*



I collected Nero and told him, “Wake me up if I start crying in my sleep, okay?” He tilted his head back at me. *Aaah! Sooo cute! I’m sure I won’t fall prey to any nightmares as long as this cutie’s with me.*

Right when my cheeks were melting into a slovenly mess, someone suddenly knocked on my door.

“Huh?” I uttered in surprise. It wasn’t late enough to call it the dead of night, but it was not the time for visits by any means. Moreover, I was a princess nearing adulthood. I thought I might’ve misheard, but I answered the door anyway. “Yes?”

The guard outside my door spoke meekly. “I apologize for interrupting your evening so late at night, but, um...someone wishes to speak to you.”

When I heard that I had an unexpected visitor, the sorcerer kidnapping incident immediately came to mind. My body stiffened as I recalled how my brother had visited me that night without any warning.

*Did something happen?*

“Who is it?” I asked, my voice sounded jittery and hoarse.

“It’s me. I’m coming in.”

The door opened before I even had time to process whom the voice belonged to. A beautiful man entered my room, intruding without bothering to pause, and I could only gape at him, dumbfounded.

I was having trouble keeping up with the turn of events. *Why? What for? There’s a limit to how thoughtless you can be!* Such thoughts were flying through my head, but I didn’t make a sound.

The man sneered at me when he saw my half-open mouth gaping up at him. “You look like a half-wit.”

Instantly, my astonishment was replaced by rage. However, he strolled over to my sofa without any regard for my emotional well-being. He flumped onto it—this demeanor was more brazen than majestic.

He then shot me a look that said, *“Hurry up and sit down,”* and I had to muster every ounce of self-control to hold myself back from shouting at him.

*This guy wouldn't even think of reflecting upon his actions even if I flipped out on him. On the contrary, he'd probably say something snarky about making too much noise late at night.*

Nero slipped out of my arms as I returned to the sofa I'd been lounging on earlier this evening. My beloved cat was very clever and had probably caught wind of trouble brewing. His bell jingled clearly as he padded toward my bed.

I sighed since my cute solace had escaped from me and braced myself for whatever was to come. Sitting down across from the man, I asked, "What brings you here, father?"

"I finished work sooner than expected today. Am I not allowed to come without a purpose?" he replied.

*What the hell is this guy saying? Of course you're not allowed. I stared at his all too beautiful face. If my older brother were the one to have said that, I would've felt abashed and pleased. But, it's father we're talking about here... A cute gesture like a head tilt inspires nothing but fear when he does it. I want to tell him to get out and then scatter salt everywhere to purify my room, but unfortunately, I can't exactly do that to the king.*

"I just wondered...what could be so urgent that you'd visit a lady's room so late at night."

"A lady," my father said flatly.

*Why is that the only part you're repeating aloud?! He looks impassive as always, but I feel like he's ridiculing me. Nix that—he's one hundred percent ridiculing me.*

"If you've finished work early, please don't let me take up your time," I told him. "Why don't you spend some quality alone time with your wife every once in a while instead?"

*"If you've got time on your hands, go put mother in a better mood,"* I implied clearly in an attempt to drive him out. However, things were never easy when it came to my father.

"Then why don't you come as well? It's important for parents to connect with their children," he suggested without hesitation. However, I had no intention of

attending such a horrifying event.

*It's terrible enough with just father...but handling mother on top of that? Sounds absolutely mortifying. Are you trying to test my stomach's endurance?*

"As appealing as your invitation sounds, I will have to decline. I'm sure mother would be delighted if you were the only one to visit her though," I said with a tight smile.

Father looked at my face fixedly for some reason. "She won't be happy if you go?"

"Huh?" The answer to his question was so obvious that I stared at him blankly.

*What are you asking with such a serious expression? Of course mother wouldn't be happy if I went to see her.*

My thoughts had probably shown on my face because father said, "I see," and then fell silent.

*What's wrong with him? I doubt he's endearing enough to be troubled about discord between a parent and her child. I wonder what's actually going through his mind?*

I kept an eye on him until he raised his head to look at me. "Oh well. That should be enough jokes for the night."

*How can you say this shit with such a straight face and then end the conversation whenever you please?! This guy is so carefree. Your jokes aren't funny and they're hard to understand! I wish someone would call him out already.*

Father ignored my scornful glare and turned his attention to the box in my possession. "So that's the item," he said, reminding me of the box's existence on top of my lap.

I nodded and placed it on top of the table. "Yes, it is what you requested that I retrieve."

I turned the box toward him and carefully opened it. Father's brows furrowed upon seeing the fist-sized stone inside the box. "*This thing is it?*" I could see the

question in his eyes, and I didn't blame him.

*It looks like a random stone that you could pick up on the side of the road. If I were in his position, I'd also be doubtful. Honestly though, I'll be in trouble if he asks me to prove that it's the real deal. I can't verify anything unless I smash it and summon the demon lord himself.*

I mulled over what to do, but contrary to my expectations, my father did not question whether the stone was real or not. Instead, in a quiet voice, he said simply, "I see."

I was baffled. This was definitely a departure from his usual arrogant behavior. His light-blue eyes turned away from the stone and fixed upon me. Instantly, I tensed up.

"You did well."

The words that came out of his mouth were so far removed from what I had imagined he'd say... For a moment, I doubted my ears.

*I did...well?*

My mind was in turmoil and those words continued to echo over and over. We were speaking in our native tongue, but the words sounded like speech from a distant foreign country. It was like I knew what the words meant but didn't truly grasp their meaning.

"It was an important mission that even an elite force would have struggled to accomplish. You did a fine job. Thank you for your service."

I never imagined that he'd ever show appreciation for my efforts...which was why I was more confused than elated by his praise. My eyes darted around my head as I wondered what father thought of me.

He sighed. "I'm complimenting you, so just accept it."

"Well...please say that after you've reflected upon your prior words and the way you've behaved toward me up until now," I accidentally clapped back.

*I mean, you've never praised me for anything ever, not once. The only things my father ever says about me are insults like "foolish daughter" or "wild boar" and so on. I'm well aware of it, and I don't think it's irrelevant to the topic at*

*hand, but part of the reason I'm twisted and embittered now is because of you, father! I don't know what the proper response is when you praise me out of the blue.*

"In that case, you need to reflect upon your own past actions." Father threw my cute little spiteful words right back at me.

*This is exactly why I'm always at a loss for words!*

My father continued. "If you were skeptical of your surroundings and more composed, I wouldn't need to make cutting remarks about you all the time. You lack vigilance and you're a simpleton who only knows how to look ahead and plunge forward. That's why I must always grab you by the collar."

I was reminded of when he physically grabbed me by the collar, but he probably meant it as a metaphor and not a reference to that incident. *Ah, I see, so you're saying I should be thanking you for stopping me from rushing in recklessly.*

"I thought you did well this time, so I merely voiced what was on my mind. There is no hidden meaning to it."

*He scolded me because I wasn't using my brain and praised me because I worked hard? That sounds like something a normal father would do.*

Turning my head away, I spoke through my teeth. "I am deeply honored by your praise."

*I know I'm not being cute, but it's impossible for me to act like we have a normal parent-child relationship now.*

Father looked me over and pulled the box closer to himself. "Your face is red."

My hands immediately flew to cover my cheeks. *Shit. I can't believe I let that fluster me, and I hate how smug he looks. I wanted to convey that I wasn't particularly happy, but I just ended up digging my own grave. How infuriating! Oh god, now it just sounds like I'm being a tsundere. I can't stand it!*

Father let me be as I worked myself into a tizzy. After he finished examining the stone, he returned it to the box and closed the lid. Thankfully, it looked like he'd take that thing away from me.

“So, what do you want as your reward?” he asked. “You want more than that dog you picked up along the way, correct?”

“Dog...?” I asked. *By dog, does he mean Ratte?* “May I hire him?”

“Now that Lapter has made their move, it’s best to have as many pawns as possible.”

*Ratte silenced the rest of the spies, but Lapter will surely take action when none of their agents return. They’ll conjecture that the stone sealing the demon king has fallen into the hands of Nevel, so it’s highly likely they’ll send assassins here. I’m sure father is thinking the same.*

“The dog you picked up is skilled and has supplied us with useful information. I have no objection. Do you mind if I keep him for the time being?”

“Of course. Please treat him well,” I said, so surprised that my voice almost cracked.

I’d been thinking that Ratte’s skills were wasted on being my personal guard, so I was actually grateful that my father had proposed taking Ratte off my hands. That wasn’t what had surprised me.

*Father asked my permission for something? It’s going to rain spears tomorrow. My father, who is practically the embodiment of arrogance in human form, said what? Every word from his mouth is an order. My father, the man who was born to be king, asked me for something?*

*It’s unthinkable—he praised me and asked me for permission. Is this man before me a fake? Has he already been taken over by the demon king?*

“I see you’re thinking about nonsense again,” he droned with another exasperated sigh.

*Apparently, I really do wear my heart on my sleeve.*

“I acknowledge that you have returned with great achievements. So, I am treating you like a fully fledged adult. Are you dissatisfied?”

“A fully fledged adult...?” I muttered those words to myself slowly, and my chest gradually grew hot. I clutched my hands over my heart and felt it beating like a drum, though not in an unpleasant way. *If anything, this feeling is...*

It was not essential that I gain recognition from father. I truly believed that I didn't mind feeling disappointed. But my heart reacted faster than my thoughts...and it was being much more honest.

*I don't want to admit it but...I'm happy.*

I pressed my cheeks with my palms in an attempt to regain control of my slackening facial muscles and tried to put on a dignified expression. Father stared at me like I was some sort of peculiar animal as I attempted to fix myself.

"It's good you were born a princess," he remarked.

"What do you mean by that?"

"If you were born as a townsperson, you would, without a shadow of a doubt, have been tricked by a good-for-nothing man. You should be grateful you are surrounded by men with upstanding morals who do not exploit your honesty and instead seek to protect your well-being."

*You're not complimenting me by calling me honest, are you? You're basically saying, "Hey, you're easy pickings, are you going to be okay?"*

"I-I have confidence in my discerning eye for men..." My tone came out not so confident, but at least I'd managed to say the words.

*I don't regret falling in love with Sir Leonhart and I deserve a pat on the back for that at least.*

However, my father seemed uninterested in what I had to say. He merely scoffed. "Is that what you want as your reward?"

"Huh?"

"I'm asking if you want Leonhart to be your fiancé."

Caught off guard, I almost nodded without fully understanding the question. *Are you just a mindless spineless reflex?* I jabbed myself internally. *But...I've been in love with him this whole time. Since long ago, I have only had eyes for him.*

The love that'd sprouted when I was young had not faded—it'd only grown stronger and stronger with every passing day. Even now, those feelings filled up a large portion of my heart. But at the same time, my love had been unrequited



for so long that I could no longer picture a future in which my love would bear fruit.

*Loving Sir Leonhart is as natural to me as breathing. But is there really any chance of Sir Leonhart loving a child like me?*

“Ye—” I wanted to say yes, but the words got stuck in my throat.

*Sir Leonhart probably wouldn't be displeased if we were engaged. I'm sure he'd cherish me. He knows how I feel about him and he would accept my love. After we married, perhaps we'd never truly feel the same sort of love for each other, but we might become a couple who trusted in each other wholeheartedly.*

The joy that had been warming my pounding heart froze over when I thought that.

*I know wishing for anything more would be indulgent of me. I know that. But I still don't like it.*

I shook my head slowly, and my father dubiously raised an eyebrow. “No?”

During our travels to the north, I'd gotten to see many different sides of Sir Leonhart. I felt like the distance between us had shrunk and we'd become closer. I didn't want to give up yet.

“I will do my best to make him mine with my own strength. Please give me the right to refuse political marriages.”

*As long as there's a chance that he'll turn my way, I don't want to crush that chance by forcing him to marry me. I don't want to bind him to me with power—I want Sir Leonhart to choose me of his own free will.*

Father blinked in surprise when he heard my request. “Your greed has exceeded my expectations.”

*Can't disagree with that... Not only do I want a place by his side, I also want his heart. I'm unbelievable.*

“Perhaps I get it from you, father.” They were spiteful words, but not ones of blame.

“I wish I could say ‘do as you like,’ but I will establish a time limit. An unmarried princess will only cause unnecessary strife.”

Father's reasoning was sound, so I did not object. "How much time may I have?"

"The same as before. Until the Kingdom of Vint's crown prince comes of age."

"The same as before?! That means I have less than three months!"

*Isn't that way too brutal?! And hey! That means the conditions have barely changed from before I accomplished anything!*

"At the very least, give me until I become an adult!" I exclaimed.

Father's eyes narrowed at my complaints. My blood froze over when I saw the cheer in his soft expression.

*I have a bad feeling.*

Instantly, I knew that I had fallen into his trap. It felt like I had practically flown into a cage by myself.

However, father betrayed my expectations—

"Very well."

—and amicably agreed.

"Th-That's acceptable?" I asked once more. Things were feeling a bit anticlimactic.

"Of course," father affirmed again. I had no idea what was going through his mind. "I'm impressed by your mental fortitude—you would willingly lessen the time I've given you."

"Did...you forget your own daughter's birthday?"

My birthday was around the end of the year in about six months' time. *I mean, it's not much of an extension, but you know what they say—necessity knows no law.*

Father stood up from his seat with the box in hand, ignoring my suspecting stare. Then, before leaving my room, he turned back. "I forgot to tell you. The first prince of Vint relinquished his succession rights to the second prince."

"What?" I mumbled.

*The second prince? As in Prince Nacht? He's going to be the next king? If I remember correctly, he's around twelve or thirteen years old... Hmm? That means there's at least two more years before Vint's crown prince comes of age?!*

“If you want to win over Leonhart with your own strength, then you'd better work hard for the next six months.” With that last biting remark, my father left the room.

*Th-Th-That shitty old maaan!!!*

# The Reincarnated Princess's Validation

I stared at myself in the mirror. Wavy and soft platinum-blond hair, alabaster skin, and blue eyes. Each feature was supposed to be the same as *hers*, but I gave off an entirely different impression than the Rosemary from *Welcome to the Hidden World*. In the game, Rosemary was a refined beauty, a true noble princess by birth, but she would sometimes show a lonely expression that stirred up people's protective instincts.

*Perhaps it's because my personality differs from hers that my face currently looks... How do I describe this? I look more...relaxed? I'm not dignified or refined, nor do I give off the ephemeral air of the game's Rosemary. I have absolutely none of her traits. That's odd... I'll be fifteen in half a year, which means I'll be an adult. That's the age Rosemary was at the start of the game. We have the same components, so isn't it strange that we ended up completely different? Don't tell me—have I squandered Rosemary's potential?*

I'd declared that I would win Sir Leonhart's heart with my own power, but I didn't know how exactly to go about doing that, so I was currently examining myself in search of my selling points. Upon an initial review of my specs, I was already suffering a setback. Rosemary's stunning appearance would only shine with the correct essence. Reality was cruel.

*N-No, I don't know that for sure yet. Like Coach An\*\*\* once said, "It's when you give up that the match is over!"*

I puffed up my chest, placed my left hand on my hip, and brought my right hand behind my head. I twisted my waist slightly and crossed my legs.

*Kill technique: Sexy Pose!*

*That's...weird. I don't look sexy at all. If anything, someone's going to ask me, "Did you hurt your neck and hip?"* I didn't know what was amiss, but I could tell something was definitely wrong with my posture.

Next, I tried placing my hands on my knees and leaning forward. *When a pin-*

*up idol does this pose, it emphasizes their voluptuous chest, but when I copy it, all you can see...is a barren...valley...? It felt like I was forgetting what words were. No, this won't work either.*

I tried every seductive pose I could think of, but the result each time was disastrous—a whopping zero percent success rate. I was faced with the harsh truth that I could not throw down the gauntlet via the sexy route.

Devastated, I heard a soft “meow” from behind me. I looked over at my bed where Nero had been observing me since the early morning. Evidently, he was sick of my eccentric behavior in front of the mirror.

I collapsed on my bed and wailed, “Neroooo...”

I tried to hug him, but Nero avoided my arms like I was being a nuisance. *Oh, how cold.*

*In the first place, what kind of woman does Sir Leonhart even like? He said he's never truly loved anyone before, but he must have some sort of preference. Does he favor intellectual women like Miss Irene? Or does he prefer women overflowing with sex appeal like Big Sis Bianca? Perhaps demure Japanese-style beauties like Lily are more his type...*

I was reminded of all the gorgeous women that surrounded me... When the realization hit, I grew dejected—all of them were more suitable to stand by Sir Leonhart's side than I.

“Or, what if...?” I muttered.

Of all the women I had been picturing, one specific person stood out from the rest. She had chiffon-beige hair that reached just past her shoulders, large eyes that twinkled with curiosity, a cute little button nose, and plump lips, soft and pink. Her eyebrows were slightly downturned, and they made you want to protect her. Her breasts were full and her waist slender, giving her an enchanting, womanly figure, but the contrast with her youthful face produced an alluring vibe.

The girl I was describing was from another world—she was the one who would become the shrine maiden.

In *Welcome to the Hidden World*, the royal guard captain cherished the

heroine. He would encourage her, console her, and he wouldn't condemn her when she failed—he even wished her happiness when he sent her back to her own world.

*The captain treated her like a younger sister, but I wonder if he actually desired to be with her as more than just her guard.*



When I thought that, I was suddenly struck with unease. *I'm definitely the one who gives off the "little sister" impression. But, how can I be sure that the captain's kindness toward the heroine in the game isn't how he shows his affection for women? I think the shrine maiden was surely dear to him because he often cheered her up in Klaus's route...but the game never explicitly stated how the captain felt toward the heroine. It's possible that he concealed his feelings because he wanted the one he loved to be happy.*

"N-No! Stop thinking about it!" I shook my head, trying to snap myself out of my increasingly depressing thoughts. This caused Nero to wake up with a start.

*It's ridiculous of me to assume what his feelings in the game were and get weak-kneed over them! Besides, the one I want to be with isn't the captain of the royal guard from the game but Sir Leonhart. And even if the shrine maiden is Sir Leonhart's ideal woman, I'll be damned if I admit defeat before the battle even starts.*

"All right!" I lightly slapped my cheeks and looked up.

*Negativity time is over! I decided I'd do my best, so there's no point in being pessimistic about the future—it's time to improve myself! If acting sexy is out of the picture, then I can still be cute! Sure, the shrine maiden also has an adorable personality, but let's not think about whether I can hold my own in a battle of cuteness.*

I clenched my fists. My beloved cat took one glance my way and then curled back up into a ball. It was almost like he was telling me, *"I'm done with your shenanigans."*

After I changed clothes and finished eating breakfast, I headed to the greenhouse. I wanted to visit my friends whom I hadn't seen in a long time; however, I had an unexpected encounter on the way there.

*Ugh*, I groaned internally.

Apparently, she'd also noticed my presence because she stopped in her tracks for a moment, but that was her only visible reaction. The beautiful woman, accompanied by her servants and guards, proceeded to pass by me without a



single word. I watched my ever-unchanging mother go and let out a small sigh when she disappeared from my sight.

*Mother really doesn't have eyes for anyone besides father.* I didn't feel sad; I felt something close to resignation—disappointment perhaps. *Too late for that now. I've always known that she was like this.* I shook off the lingering regret and began walking toward the greenhouse once more.

At first, I thought I was unlikely to see Lutz and Teo there, but when I arrived, I could see silhouettes in the break room next to the greenhouse. I quietly peered into the room to find my two friends inside...but they seemed a bit off. One was flopped on top of the table and the other was listlessly staring up as he leaned against the back of his chair.

*Is it just me, or do they look exhausted?* They appeared so drained that I hesitated on whether I should call out to them or not. I was standing by the door, wondering what to do, when Teo, who'd been gazing up at the ceiling, turned toward me. His pigeonite-colored eyes, which usually held a strong glint, stared at me vacantly.

Teo gazed at me without a hint of shock and narrowed his eyes. "Ah, crap. I'm so tired that I'm starting to hallucinate." He chuckled emptily.

Lutz's motionless body stirred when he said that. Without sitting up, Lutz turned his head and caught sight of me.

"I see her too... I wonder if the princess is doing well..." His smile had no energy.

At that moment, I realized that I was being treated as an illusion. "I'm the real thing," I called out, waving at them. "And I'm doing very well."

Lutz stayed slumped on the table and waved back at me. "My hallucination is amazing. She's even waving at me."

Just as I was beginning to seriously worry about Lutz's condition, Teo bolted upright. "She waved to me too...which means...we're not hallucinating?!"

"What... Huh?!" Lutz eyed Teo and me, blinking rapidly. After a few seconds of that, he slammed his hands on the table and stood up. His leg accidentally hit his chair, causing it to topple over loudly.

“P-Princess...?”

“Princess, is that really you?”

They gawked at me, eyes wide in disbelief. I felt unnerved but gave them a small nod. “I returned yesterday. I tried to say hello sooner, but neither of you were in the greenhouse.”

Lutz rushed over to me. “We were working on a mission in a different room yesterday... But never mind about that. You really are the princess, right? Are you hurt? You didn’t fall ill during your journey, did you?” He asked all of this in rapid succession.

“I-I’m fine.”

He was towering over me with such immense pressure that I instinctively took a step back. I was curious about what their mission was, but I figured I should dispel the worry from Lutz, the local worrywart. I shook my head. “I told you already, I’m doing well. And I’m not injured either.”

Lutz let out a sigh of relief and muttered, “That’s great.”

He seemed a bit more grown-up than he used to. *Come to think of it, Lutz also looks different than he did in the game...* The yandere sorcerer in *Hidden World* was frail, and coupled with his delicate face, he looked like a boyish young lady.

However, the Lutz before me was tall—though he was slender, he had a solid build. His well-defined facial features remained the same, but he had a dignified air to him, and few would mistake him for a girl.

“I’m relieved to see you in good health, Princess,” Teo said from beside Lutz.

Teo also looked different than his counterpart from the game, though the difference wasn’t as large as Lutz’s. His appearance hadn’t changed much, but the amicable, hot-blooded sorcerer from *Hidden World* had never shown the players a calm gaze or mature laugh.

*They’ve both become fine young men...* Huh, I was reacting as if I were their aunt. *Well, I have known them since they were boys, so I feel very emotional right now!*

“Why are you looking at us so warmly?” Teo peered at me suspiciously.

Hurriedly, I tried to pull myself together and fix my expression. I considered telling them my honest thoughts, but boys their age would think I was teasing and might get upset if I praised them.

“You both look exhausted,” I said. “Is everything all right?” As soon as I asked that, the light in their eyes dimmed. “Does your mission involve hard labor?”

“No... It’s not our bodies that are tired,” Teo weakly whispered with a worn-out expression.

“I’d rather be doing physical tasks. I hate using my brain...” Lutz wrinkled his brow and rubbed his temples. “Aaah! My head hurts just remembering it.”

*The two of you have become a pair of muscle-brained sorcerers.* It was a rude thought, and I kept it to myself as I watched over them warmly.

After that reunion, I brewed some tea for my two weary friends and we began to catch up. The tea leaves for today’s black tea were greenish, indicating that they were from the first flush. The rising steam had a refreshing aroma as well.

“Here you go.” I handed Teo a cup of tea.

“Thank you,” he replied.

Meanwhile, Lutz was stuffing his mouth with snacks. After a few bites, he furrowed his brows. “These aren’t your sweets, Princess.”

Today’s treats were madeleines. They’d been handmade by the castle chef, so they must have been delicious, but Lutz looked dissatisfied.

“Don’t be absurd,” Teo chided. “Princess told us that she just returned yesterday.”

“I know, but...” Lutz looked away, abashed.

“Well, I haven’t been able to make sweets recently,” I admitted. “I’ll bring some soon.”

“Really?!”

“Yes. I received spices from my Flanmerian acquaintances, so I’ve been wanting to use them to try and create new desserts. Will you taste test them

for me?”

Lutz’s eyes sparkled and he eagerly nodded. Though he’d grown into a handsome young man, his childish expressions had remained the same. As his (unofficial) aunt, it made me want to feed hungry youths like him.

*I have cinnamon now, so I could bake an apple pie...but perhaps cinnamon rolls would be more filling? I also want to try baking a cake salé. Or maybe, I should try something curry flavored.*

While I was flipping through my mental recipe book, Teo peered at me with concern. “We’re happy when you make food for us, but don’t force yourself. You’ve been terribly busy, haven’t you, Princess?”

“I got excellent sleep last night, so I’m fully recovered. The two of you look more drained than I am. You said you had a mission to fulfill, but have things settled down now?”

“We’re not yet finished...but the prospects are promising,” Teo replied.

“Yep. Thanks to the new information...” Lutz stopped himself and looked to Teo. “Uh, are we still not allowed to say anything?”

“Princess, we can’t tell you the details of our mission, but I’m sure His Majesty will fill you in on the matter himself.”

I was about to agree in understanding, but I froze. *Ugh*, I thought reflexively. *Those are some disturbing words to hear. If His Majesty must loop me in himself, then that means I have to see him again soon. Wait, is this what Crow meant by “your turn is tomorrow”? Was the surprise visit yesterday night not the end of the conversation?!*

*I thought that I was done with such abhorrent events, so I came to have tea with a reinvigorated mind...but it seems that it was all for naught. I’m not as bad as I used to be when it comes to dealing with father, but he’s still not someone I want to see on a daily basis. Encountering him once a month...no, once a year would be ideal.*

I swallowed the sigh that was trying to escape from my throat and raised my face. Klaus, who’d been on standby near the entrance, was walking toward me. The Klaus of late had learned how to wait (ostensibly), so he must have had

business with me. I questioned him with my eyes and he informed me that I had a visitor.

*I've been getting many unexpected guests since yesterday.*

"Who is it?" I asked.

"The captain," Klaus answered.

*The captain... Huh?! The captain?!*

It was so unexpected that I could only play back the words in my mind. I stood up the instant I fully comprehended his words. Lutz and Teo looked at me in confusion, but I didn't have time to worry about them. As a princess, the correct action to take would be to say "send him in" with a composed tone and elegant smile...but that was futile. I would never be able to stay calm in front of Sir Leonhart.

*Don't act disgracefully,* I scolded myself, opening the doors to greet him personally. Standing outside was Sir Leonhart, who appeared a bit surprised. Our gazes met, and the corners of his eyes softened into a smile.

"Good morning, Your Highness. Did you sleep well last night?"

*I can't do it—I love him.* All my vocabulary had flown out the window, and I just wanted to clutch my heart and crouch down on the ground. I'd thought that my resilience toward his charm had improved some during our journey together, but apparently, that had all been in my head. A single smile and I'd almost ascended to heaven already.

*Sir Leonhart is precious today as well.*

"I did," I managed to reply. "I see that you have promptly returned to your duties, but how are you faring?"

"My only redeeming feature is my robust body, so there are no problems at all," he joked, lightly pounding his chest with a fist.

*Saying that your robust body is your only redeeming feature... Lies! Sir Leonhart's existence is valuable even when he's merely breathing. If you'd like, I can make a list of one hundred of your strong points and present it to you.*

"By the way, Your Highness—I deeply apologize for interrupting your pleasant

chat, but I have a message from His Majesty.”

I hadn’t thought for a moment that Sir Leonhart had voluntarily come to see me. I liked that he wasn’t a person to do personal business while working, so it was fine.

Yes, it was fine, but...

“No... I’m the one who should apologize for taking up time in your busy schedule, Sir Leonhart.” I awkwardly cast my eyes down.

This caused him to shake his head in a panic as he tried to reassure me that it was no trouble at all. He truly was a kind man.

*You have my sincerest apologies... The royal guard captain is being treated like a gopher.* Incidentally, his message was about my dreaded interview, just as I’d expected. It was to be held this afternoon.

*I’m still dejected about having to meet father again, but at least the damage I took was lessened because Sir Leonhart delivered the message... Could it be? Is that why he was playing the role of messenger?*

Sir Leonhart left as soon as he finished his business. *He’s wonderful when he’s working diligently too. I love him.*

I reluctantly watched him go and then returned to Lutz and Teo. For some reason, both of them were staring fixedly at me, unmoving.

“Is something wrong?” I asked, tilting my head.

As if a spell had been broken, the two of them suddenly snapped back to their senses. Teo leaped up from his seat as vigorously as I had earlier and even knocked his chair over in the process.

“P-P-Princess?!”

“Huh? Wh-What is it?” I panicked over what was going on because even Teo, who was usually composed, was acting highly distraught.

“Just now...” Teo began to say something but stopped, making me even more curious as to why he was so shaken. His gaze wandered around the room as if he had not yet organized his thoughts. Finally, his eyes fell on Lutz.

However, Lutz looked considerably distressed as well. He was so flustered that if we were in a manga, his eyes would have been swirling circles.

“N-No, wait! Don’t jump to conclusions!” Lutz yelled as he held his head up with his elbows propped up against the table. He sounded like he was telling that to himself.

“*Conclusions about what?*” I wanted to say, but it did not feel like it was the time to ask.

Dazed, Teo righted his chair and sat back down. “The gentleman just now... He was the captain of the royal guard, right?”

“That’s right,” I confirmed.

Teo let out an empty laugh. “Yes, of course he was...”

“He’s handsome, he has a good personality, and he’s the best swordsman in the whole country. He’s from a high-ranking family, so he has pedigree too. What the hell am I supposed to do?” Lutz grumbled under his breath. It sounded like he was chanting a spell.

From the bits of his ramble that I managed to pick up and piece together, I figured out that he was referring to Sir Leonhart.

“What do I beat him in?” Lutz continued in a mutter. “Magical power?”

“Calm down, Lutz. That’s not something to compete in,” Teo told him.

“Then what?! Youth?!” Lutz snapped.

I couldn’t keep up with their argument. “Why are you trying to compete with Sir Leonhart?” I asked, head tilted to the side.

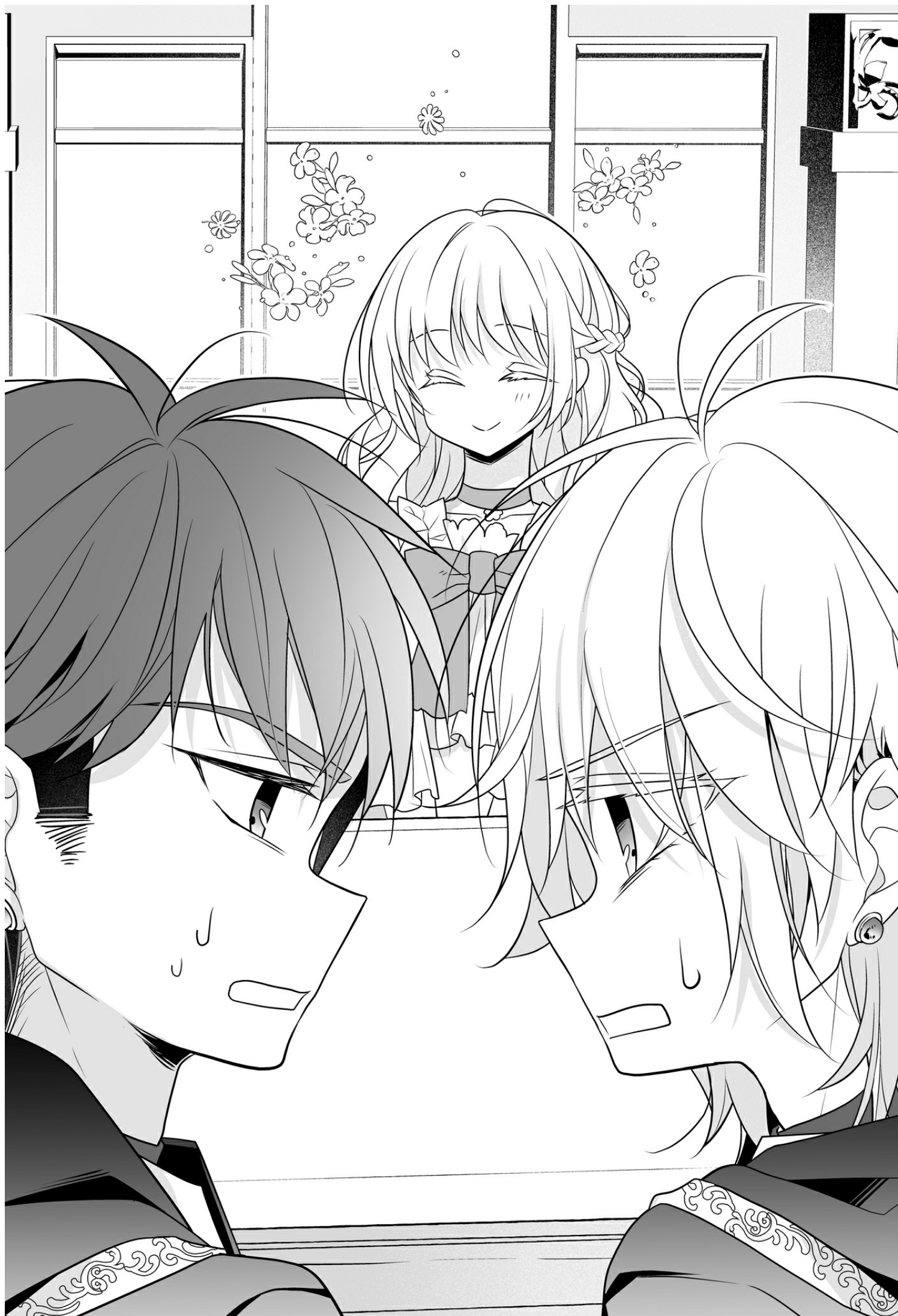
“Lady Rosemary, it’s nothing you need to pay heed to,” Klaus replied, as if he knew exactly what they were debating.

*It doesn’t seem like he’ll answer my question...even though he knows the reason. Why? Is this something only men will understand?*

Lutz and Teo huddled close together and began whispering in low voices that I could not overhear. Occasionally, I picked out words such as “age” or “admiration,” but it was nonsense to me.

*Perhaps the two of them are in awe after witnessing how remarkable Sir Leonhart is from up close. Oh, yes, I understand how you two feel. He's so cool, isn't he? He becomes more sensational with each passing year, so they must look up to him as fellow men. I understand completely.*





# The Reincarnated Princess's Confidential Discussion

Lutz and Teo exchanged glances once they finished their private discourse. After downing their tea, they stood up in sync. They were moving so quickly that you wouldn't have thought they were the same pair who'd been listlessly lying on top of the table a few moments ago.

My eyes widened in surprise by their sudden rush of vigor.

"Thank you for the delicious tea and snacks, Princess," Teo said.

"You two are...leaving?" I asked.

*Are they still swamped with work because of their mission? I wanted to have a leisurely chat with them since it's been so long. What a shame...*

"We're going to go train."

"Lately, we've only been using our heads, so our bodies have grown weak," explained Lutz. "We have to discipline ourselves."

I was unsure whether I should be impressed or dumbfounded by their unexpected answer. I could see splendid muscles on their necks and arms that peeked out from under their robes—they looked anything but weak. When they stood up straight, they looked manly and their movements were sharp without any wasted motions. They were built like knights. Unless they were up against a skilled warrior, they looked like they could win a fistfight without using any magic.

*And they're not satisfied with that? Frankly, I'm not too sure what path those two are walking toward. I was just teasing about them being muscle-brained, but it's starting to not sound like a joke...*

"Do your best," I encouraged, waving goodbye.

"Yes, I'll work hard," Teo said.

"I will, so watch me closely," declared Lutz.

Their smiles were gentle but their eyes were serious. I watched the two

determined young men go before taking my leave as well.

That afternoon, I was once again surprised to be greeted by Sir Leonhart—he'd come to fetch me for the most stressful interview of my life.

*Now he's not just a messenger but an escort too? I'd like to ask if this is a reward of some sort, but I won't feel happy knowing that it was my father's suggestion. I have a hunch that he's about to foist another tiresome task upon me. Perhaps letting me see Sir Leonhart is an advance payment of some sort?*

I stared at Sir Leonhart as we walked side by side. He noticed my gaze and looked back at me, puzzled. "Is something the matter?" He tilted his head slightly and smiled.

*Oooh... He's priceless. If this is my remuneration, then I think even if father tells me to fetch another stone sealing the demon lord, I could give it my all. Wait, no! It'll only be trouble if there's a second stone...*

"Not at all. I apologize for causing you so much inconvenience in one day," I answered, brows lowered.

*I bet it wasn't actually my father who instructed you to give me prior notice about when we'd be meeting. After all, the king drops by my room in the middle of the night without making an appointment—he's not one to be thoughtful about trifling matters. No, it was only because Sir Leonhart was gracious enough to inform me in advance that I had time to mentally prepare. I'm sorry someone busy like you is being abused at the convenience of my father and me.*

Sir Leonhart blinked in surprise. His eyes narrowed, and he said in a quiet voice, "It's no inconvenience if I get to see you."

After being stupefied for a few seconds I finally uttered an idiotic noise. "Huh?"

*Did I just have an auditory hallucination? And it was one that makes me feel embarrassed by all the dreams I have of him...* It was the sort of auditory hallucination that made me want to quip, "*What is this, an otome game?!*"

*Oh no. Am I actually more exhausted than I realized...? I figured I'd slept well...but perhaps father's invasion last night was more burdensome than I*

*thought.*

It pained me to know that I had misheard Sir Leonhart, so I stared at him in hopes that he'd repeat himself. However, Sir Leonhart only looked troubled. *It doesn't look like he intends to say it again. How regrettable.*

We stared at each other in silence. Sir Leonhart exhaled and a laugh slipped out with it. "Pfft," he snorted quietly. He looked like he was enjoying himself. "You're a tough one."

*Wh-Wh-Wh-What do you mean by that?! Huh? Was that actually not an auditory hallucination? That can't be right... Was it real or not?*

*If I accept that my ears heard right but then find out later that I misheard...I'll take critical damage. So please, explain yourself clearly. Come on! Ears and memory—you can do it!*

"Um, p-pardon me..." Pathetic stutters escaped from my lips even though I desperately didn't want him to be annoyed with me.

Whenever I was with Sir Leonhart, I always messed up and became flustered. I must've been making an awful face, but he didn't look fed up at all. His eyes were kind and he smiled at me reassuringly.

"Don't worry. Please use me as much as you'd like."

I didn't want to use him, but I couldn't help but feel happy that he'd said that to me. My face flushed bright red and I could only look down.

*Can I really...? If you say those sorts of things to me, I'll start having expectations...*

Though my heart was pounding so hard that it almost hurt, I wanted to walk next to him just like this forever... But of course, such an innocent, maidenly wish would not be granted.

We soon reached my father's room.

*Why is your room so close? Why didn't we arrange to meet somewhere farther away? Stupid father. If this is how it's going to be, then I might as well live in a different building.* I feigned serenity even though I was venting and complaining at my father in my heart. But apparently, my emotions were in

plain sight.

As soon as my father saw my face, he raised an eyebrow. “You’re making a peculiar face.”

“I was born with it.”

“Is that so?” He left it at that, appearing to decide that it was too bothersome to comment any further.

After our usual father-daughter banter ended, I realized that Sir Leonhart was holding back his laughter next to me. *Shit. We finally had a good mood going and now it’s gone! Father, this is all your fault.* I avoided facing the reality—it was almost entirely my fault that the pleasant mood had disappeared.

“Hurry up over here,” my father ordered, deadpan.

I followed him into a small room. The narrow space was furnished to the bare minimum, though a modest chair had been added. It was a little funny to imagine that my father had probably carried it in himself. *I would’ve loved to see that.*

While I was thinking trivial things, my father had flopped onto the couch and was now motioning for me to take a seat. I obediently complied and sat on the chair. Sir Leonhart stood diagonally behind me. I never imagined that I would enter this tiny room alongside him, and it felt kind of strange.

Many old books were stacked on top of the table, and one of them was open to a page of what looked like drawn diagrams of magic circles. *Is that the same as the one I saw before I left for the northern border? If I recall, I asked if it was related to sealing away the demon lord, and he denied it. I wonder what it’s for...*

I examined the page with intrigue until I felt someone’s gaze upon me. When I looked up, I locked eyes with my father, who was leaning back on his couch. After a few seconds, he began speaking. “I summoned the two of you here today to discuss our method of dealing with the stone sealing the demon lord.”

“Dealing with it?” I repeated aloud. He hadn’t said sealing but *dealing with*, which made me question what he intended to do.

Father continued as if he'd read my mind. "Originally, sealing the demon lord within this stone was the safest method. However, the current seal has not broken, and it's unknown whether we can layer on additional seals. Temporarily breaking the seal so we can place a new one would be putting the cart before the horse, and based on how much time has passed since this seal was placed, neglecting the stone would be a bad move as well."

I grasped what father wanted to say. But, even if he wanted to, we had no way of destroying it or throwing it away safely.

"And so you want to dispose of it somehow," I concluded. "But, I thought it had to be sealed because no one has ever found a way to truly destroy the demon lord."

"We've never succeeded, but our country has spent years researching options." Father reached out and picked up the book that had been lying open on the table. He showed us the diagram of a magic circle drawn on the page.

"What is that?" I asked.

"It's a magic circle that can summon someone from another world who has the power to eliminate the demon lord."

My eyes opened wide with shock.

"It's a preposterous story," my father said after seeing the surprise on my face. "You wouldn't believe me even if I told you to."

*That's...not exactly true.*

I was more surprised that I hadn't deduced this sooner. In fantasy movies and manga, magic circles were more well-known for their use in summonings rather than sealings. Additionally, the time frame at the beginning of *Hidden World* was drawing near, but the most indispensable person had not yet arrived in this world. There was only one conclusion that I could've drawn from these two facts.

The magic circle was to summon the heroine—the shrine maiden.

"When I first read this book, I initially decided it was just fiction or a delusion. I disregarded it, thinking someone with too much time on their hands had

written it...but there's too much extensive research on this subject to brush it off as someone being eccentric."

"Extensive? Is there more than this book?"

"I found a mountain of documents and papers that existed before this book's compilation. There were enough materials to show that this was research passed down for generations." Father was resting his chin on his hands. He looked bored, but I could hear the wonder in his voice.

*When our predecessors first began researching, there was hardly any data to work with, and no hints. Decades must've passed before they made any progress. They probably didn't even know if a method to destroy the demon lord existed in the first place. Their research was like trying to catch clouds. It's astounding to imagine that they continued to pass this research down to their children and on to their grandchildren.*

It was the same tenacity I'd felt when they'd managed to seal away the demon lord. *The reason humanity has survived for so long is because we're bad at giving up*, I thought once again.

"It took a while, but after reviewing all of the data and documents, I determined that there *is* merit to trying this method."

I had visited this room several times, and while I'd been struggling against my own battles, he had been reading the whole time. I'd thought he enjoyed reading as a hobby because he appeared so relaxed, but apparently I'd been wrong. Although the research of our ancestors had been incomplete, he'd entrusted the continuation of the research to Miss Irene and the other sorcerers.

And, this was most certainly the mission that Lutz and Teo had mentioned. The research had also likely taken shape because of the information Ratte had brought with him.

*But still...*

Father spoke the words that I'd left unsaid in my heart. "You find my belief surprising. It's written all over your face."

I nodded without bothering to pretend otherwise. After all, that was exactly

what was going through my mind. My father was a realist, so I never would've guessed he'd believe in the existence of other worlds. I also would've never anticipated that he'd select a method that had an uncertain feasibility...regardless of how many hundreds of years our ancestors had spent researching it.

My usual way of conveying my thoughts in an oblique manner was too bothersome, so I just let him read my doubt as it was. Father was far from angry. "Of course," he said in agreement. "Originally, it was just one of the many options I was looking into. If I had ample time, I wouldn't rely on such a dubious method."

He was certainly not a person driven by emotional reasons such as wanting to complete his ancestors' research or having faith that hard work paid off. Father was still the same man I knew to the very end—if time had allowed, he would've chosen a simpler and more reliable method.

"Is it because the seal may break at any moment?" I asked.

Father shook his head. "It's because Lapter is now desperate to obtain the demon lord."

It sounded like a grave situation for the world, but father's tone was relaxed. He looked annoyed, but only about as annoyed as if little flies were flitting around his face.

"They've begun moving sooner than predicted, and their desperation shows no limit or care for pretenses. It's fairly troubling."

*Only one day has passed since my return. I presumed they would realize something was wrong once none of their agents returned, but they are moving much faster than expected. That just goes to show how essential the demon lord is to Lapter.*

"Assassins will be sent here. We will strengthen the security around you. Keep that in mind."

My eyes widened when I heard "assassin"—a dangerous word indeed. *I agree that father and brother should increase the guards around them...but me too? I may be royalty, but I find it unlikely that they'd target a mere princess like me. I*



*have no chance of getting involved in politics, nor do I have any claim to the throne. Sure, I may have value as a hostage, but that would be a high-risk and low-return venture.*

My head was cocked to the side as I mulled over the situation. Father peered at me. Then, when he deemed I'd been given enough time, he let out a heavy sigh.

"Don't tell me—will that part of you never be fixed?" he asked with a straight face. I only became more confused.

*Am I actually terminally ill? Because I'd prefer it if he'd said that with his exasperated tone instead. And anyway, what's wrong with me that needs fixing? Well, I do understand that I'm not very perceptive... Wait, he's not saying that I'm stupid, right? No, that actually sounds like what he's implying.*

"You're not being obsequious, nor are you acting humble. You're insufferable because you truly mean it." Father turned to Sir Leonhart and asked, "Don't you agree?"

I timidly glanced at Sir Leonhart. His eyebrows were scrunched and his smile strained as he looked unsure how to respond. I gleaned passive agreement from his expression. He didn't need to say anything—he obviously shared similar thoughts with my father.

*I'm shocked. I don't even know what's hopeless about me, but if someone as kind as Sir Leonhart isn't defending me, then it must be a substantially awful trait. Am I dumb? Is it really because I'm so stupid that he can't bring himself to support me?*

"Enough. Understand your own worth." Father looked me straight in the eyes. His frigid, straightforward gaze showed no signs of jest, and that stare was like a sword being pointed toward me. I almost flinched.

"The Kingdom of Vint is indebted to you—you are a hero. You are also popular within the country due to the impact of the Dew of the Sea. Moreover, do you truly believe that Lapter would ignore the princess who not only turned one of their assassins but also snatched away the stone sealing the demon lord?"

*It's an exaggeration to call me a hero, and I'm not directly tied to the Dew of the Sea. And I wonder if they even know that Ratte switched sides because of me.* There were a few things I wished to retort with, but nothing came out of my mouth.

"You are, without a doubt, a hindrance to Lapter."

I was so overwhelmed by my father's intensity that I gulped. My throat made a weird gurgling noise.

The magic circle was not yet complete, so we would discuss the details at a later date. Miss Irene would be the one explaining the mechanisms to us, so father ended our little interview there.

Shortly before we left the room, father and Sir Leonhart discussed something in hushed tones, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. Normally, I would've tried to eavesdrop out of curiosity, but right now, I had my hands full dealing with my own business.

On the way back to my room, I remembered my father's words:

*"You are, without a doubt, a hindrance to Lapter."*

*Up until now, I've been totally blind to my surroundings. I've only ever looked forward, endeavoring to do whatever I could as I pushed myself onward. As a result, I didn't ever stop to think about how my actions have influenced others. I'd thought that preventing the plague and stopping the demon lord's revival were positive things that would benefit everyone, but that's not the case.*

*Ultimately, that is only true from Nevel and Nevel's allies' perspective—it's the complete opposite from our enemies' viewpoint. It's just as father said. I'm quite the nuisance to Lapter.*

When I became fully aware of this truth, I felt a chill run up my spine. My body stiffened the moment I realized that my life was in danger. I clenched my fists tightly, but my blood was not circulating properly to my fingertips, and they turned so cold that it felt like there was no hope of warming them up.

I'd traveled to many places and experienced many things by now. My journeys had been filled with many vicissitudes, and my life had been in danger more than once or twice. I'd been helpless and frightened each time, but the

terror I felt now was a different kind of fear.

It wasn't the same as accidentally running into peril—I was being forcibly dragged into it. There were people who wished for my death. And even worse, being a target for assassination meant that I would never know when, where, or who would attack me. Where should I look? Whom should I be wary of? How long would I have to endure this threat of death looming over my head?

*It's terrifying to be clueless. It feels as if I've been suddenly tossed into the vast, dark ocean at night. I'm so anxious that it feels like the ground around me is crumbling away. How long will this feeling continue? Will I live in fear for the rest of my life?*

When I pondered these things, I lost hope. It was as if light were draining from the world around me.

I stared down at my feet, lost in my swirl of negative thoughts.

"Princess," a voice called out, bringing me back to my senses.

I glanced up to see Sir Leonhart looking down at me, concern filling his eyes.

*Come on, Rosemary! That's no good—you'll worry him.*

*Sir Leonhart is the captain of the royal guard. In other words, it's his job to protect the royal family. And yet here I am, looking like I'm going to die of anxiety. That's rude to his efforts. I'm basically telling him that I don't trust his skills, Klaus's, or any of the other knights'.*

*I must smile, even if I have to force myself to. I may just be putting up a front or bluffing, but I must be composed. That is my duty as royalty.* As I told myself all this, I tried to smile.

My attention, which was focused on lifting the twitching corners of my mouth, turned to the soft sound of rustling cloth. Then, I concentrated on the feeling of my cold fingertips. I didn't immediately recognize what was touching my fingers, though it felt firm and warm. I slowly looked down at my hands. Rough fingers had gently enveloped my own frigid ones.

A strangled noise escaped my lips. I understood that Sir Leonhart was holding my hand, but that only added to my confusion. I felt heat emanating from his

gloveless hands, but rather than feeling embarrassed or thrilled, the first thing that came to mind was that I was being a nuisance once again. Though no one else was present at the moment, we were still inside the castle. Who knew when someone else might walk down this hall?

If I considered Sir Leonhart's position and my status, only he would be reproached if anyone saw this. *No, I can't allow that. Absolutely not.*

I immediately attempted to pull my hands away, but I failed—Sir Leonhart tightened his hold as if he'd heard my thoughts.

*Why? I don't want to trouble you.* My impatience grew and I thought I might begin bawling like a child. My face crumpled into a mess, but Sir Leonhart still would not let go of my hands.

"Princess."

I looked up and stopped moving when I saw the look on Sir Leonhart's face. I probably would have resisted more if he had been trying to soothe me the way he usually did—like an adult soothing a child. However, his expression was different this time. *How could I continue rejecting someone who looks like they're in a lot more pain than I am?*

After a moment of silence, Sir Leonhart said, "If you're scared, it's fine to say that you are."

I was caught off guard by those unexpected words.

"If it's tough," he continued, "say that it's tough. If you're in pain, then please say you're in pain. I beg you. I don't want you to hide it."

I was shocked. I'd hardly ever seen Sir Leonhart plead so desperately. My hands were starting to ache from his powerful grip.

"I do not only wish to protect your life," he said emphatically.

I couldn't even speculate on what he was feeling as he spoke. *If it were the usual Sir Leonhart... Well, he'd be acting like a composed adult, and I'd have guessed that he was trying to offer me peace of mind with these words. But...he's acting differently than normal.*

"I want to protect not only your life, but also your heart, the things you

cherish—everything. But, I’m a hopelessly thickheaded man. I may not notice everything if you hide your feelings from me. I want to believe you when you tell me you’re fine. I don’t want things to become irreparable.”

Confounded, no words came from my mouth. The tears that had been welling in my eyes had also disappeared. I merely stood frozen before him, eyes wide.

Sir Leonhart’s brows lowered in concern. “To be honest...I didn’t want to be so pathetic in front of you. In your eyes, I am genuinely a hundred times better than any man, so I wanted to conduct myself in such a way that you wouldn’t become disillusioned. But I thought disappointing you would be much better than feeling regret for not speaking to you truthfully.”

Sir Leonhart smiled wryly and I reflexively shook my head. *That’s not true. I’m not disillusioned or disappointed. It’s not like I love everything about him unconditionally... It’s much easier than that—right now, my heart is fluttering so intensely.*

My heart had never pounded so hard in my life before.

But Sir Leonhart took my denial as politeness and his strained smile only grew wider. “You truly are a compassionate one.”

“No...” I wanted to refute him, but the words wouldn’t come to me. My frustration grew.

*Why does my extensive vocabulary fly away in front of Sir Leonhart? Now that I’ve hesitated once, anything else I say will just sound contrived. It’ll just sound like I’m trying to gloss things over.*

*I’m not like that. I’m really not! I don’t say kind things to you out of sympathy. It’s nothing high-minded like that. And it’s not just a pretty story in which I accept everything about you because I love you from the bottom of my heart.*

*I’m simply in love with you. You’ve pierced me with Cupid’s arrow, right in my heart.*

“The real person is a thousand times more wonderful than my imagination—ah!”

The words that spilled out of my mouth were my true, unadulterated feelings,

but I hadn't meant to vocalize them. At least, I hadn't meant to say them in such a straightforward manner. I paled when it dawned on me that, in my distress, I'd inadvertently let my real thoughts slip out.

*Not only am I childish, but now I've also made a foolish remark to him. And...I've practically just admitted that I regularly fantasize about him! He's going to be taken aback by me. He's definitely going to think I'm creepy!*

However, no matter how long I waited, Sir Leonhart did not respond. His hand remained wrapped around mine.

When I nervously looked up, I was dumbstruck.

Sir Leonhart's free hand was covering his mouth and his face was flushed bright scarlet. His eyes roamed the halls until he cleared his throat, an act to pull himself together.

"That's... Um... I'm honored to hear that." His voice was quieter than usual, a telltale sign of his embarrassment.

Unsure of what to do, I cast my eyes downward once again. I'd completely lost my chance to let go of his hand.

*Even feeling awkward together makes me so happy I could cry! And all this despite the fact that, just moments ago, I was petrified because my life was in danger.*

*Oh, I'm such a calculating woman.*

# The Sorcerers' Training

I took off my robe and tossed it into the corner of the room. Teo immediately picked it up and glared at me.

“Lutz. You’re going to damage the fabric,” he scolded, dusting off the robe. “How many times do I have to tell you not to treat your stuff poorly?”

“It’s fine. It can take a little bit of rough treatment,” I replied lazily while I stretched to warm up my muscles. My partner was more like a nagging mother, so even when he was complaining about my behavior, he still took care of me.

Teo sighed and slipped off his own robe as well. “You’re always so irresponsible... You should pay attention to your appearance a little.” He paused, peering at me. “You’ve got bedhead back there, you know.”

My hand moved up to check—just as he said, I had a tuft sticking out at a weird angle. *Yeah, well, who cares. Doesn’t my hairstyle look like a mass of bedhead anyway?*

“I’m not particularly ashamed of my appearance,” I said honestly.

Teo squinted at me. “So...you don’t care if the princess thinks you’re a slovenly man?”

I froze mid-stretch, one leg bent and the other extended out.

“I heard that women favor clean and orderly men,” he continued while neatly folding his robe. “I wonder if the princess is the same.”

I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. His distinctive red hair was neatly trimmed short, and there was not a single stain on the white shirt he’d been wearing beneath his robe. The top two buttons were undone, but he didn’t look disheveled because of the collar pin fastened on the shirt.

He looked manly and strong as well as cheerful and pleasant. Teo had matured into a flawless and fine young man... It made me grind my teeth. “Well, maybe I’ll feel more approachable because I have some flaws.”

Despite sounding like a complete sore loser, I walked up to Teo, took my robe, and folded it properly before returning to my warm-up exercises. Smiling with satisfaction, Teo also began warming up.

Being treated like an adult made my pathetic side more prominent. *The princess definitely prefers clean and reliable older men.* The royal guard captain floated into mind. Unlike me, who was often called androgynous by others, *his* face was full of manly charm, and he was gallant to boot. I could tell, even as he was wearing his uniform, that he had a well-built body. As a fellow man, it made me green with envy.

Although the guard captain was a powerful man in this country, he did not act haughtily. Instead, he possessed an amicable and calm personality. His posture was beautiful, straight as a board—from just the way he stood, I could sense confidence built upon years of experience.

*How the hell am I supposed to surpass a man like that?!* I screamed inside my heart as I bit my lip. *I don't feel like I can catch up to him, let alone surpass him.*

“Lutz, ready to go?”

“Yeah...” I took a deep breath to shake off my gloomy feelings. If I exercised, unnecessary thoughts would no longer plague my mind. Once I was ready, I nodded and turned to face Teo. We never used weapons during combat training, only basic martial arts.

“Let’s do this,” I announced, lunging forward.

I thrust my fist at Teo, but he diverted my blow with his hand. I quickly turned my other fist on him, but he deflected it the same way. Like a flowing river, Teo switched from defending to attacking—he threw a right, then a left. I blocked his punches with my arms. Teo didn’t stop there, continuing his flurry of blows. I deflected his third punch up and his fourth one down.

I used the recoil from parrying his strike to spin away, creating some distance between the two of us. Taking a moment to catch my breath, I then charged in for another attack—a kick.

Teo dodged by leaning back, but I let my kick fly through the air and used the momentum to spin into another kick. Teo put his guard up and blocked my



second kick with his forearm. I threw a punch directly after, but he deflected it easily. I continued the barrage with my other hand, but this time, Teo neutralized my blow by shifting his weight back.

Then, he swiftly grabbed my extended arm and threw me onto the ground.

“Kah!” I immediately broke my fall with a roll so my landing didn’t hurt much. But reflexively, I shut my eyes and grumbled an “ow” while recovering.

I opened my eyes. Teo stood in front of me with his arm stretched out, offering to help me up. Frustrated, I began sulking, but I took his hand anyway and hauled myself to my feet. After patting the dust off my clothes, I turned back to Teo.

“One more time,” I demanded.

Teo rolled his neck, then curtly replied, “Sure, but don’t hurt yourself.” He looked done with my attitude already.

“Let yourself be distracted by unnecessary things and you’ll get knocked off your feet.” I mimed tripping him with my foot.

Teo sighed, seemingly at a loss for words. Then, his exasperated expression changed to a wry smile. “You’re one to talk. You were probably thinking about the princess or the royal guard captain anyway.”

I said nothing in return, but my silence was telling enough.

“I understand how you feel. I was surprised too...” Teo murmured as if he were talking to himself. He was looking minutely down, so his eyes were slightly shadowed—it made him appear somber. “I’d just never thought about it before...so it was a big shock... No. I just never thought about it on purpose. The princess is already a grown woman. The possibility that she was in love with someone was always there, and even if she didn’t have someone in mind, she’d be engaged eventually.”

Teo stated the reality that neither of us wanted to face in a matter-of-fact tone. “A princess can’t stay unmarried forever.”

“I know that.”

But I was lying. I didn’t know. I didn’t want to know. My response was a reflex

—I didn't want to hear the truth.

Teo peered at my frown. He, too, had a bitter look on his face, but his lips quirked up ever so slightly. "Even though I know the facts in my mind, I can't keep up with it here." He lightly tapped his chest above his heart.

When I saw his pained smile, I understood that Teo felt the same way I did. I didn't refute his words but instead cast my eyes down and nodded.

The princess had been my first female friend as well as my first love. But...that wasn't all she was to me. If Rosemary hadn't existed in my life, I had a feeling that I would've gone down a very different path. That was how large of an impact her existence had made on me.

*Because of the princess, I learned to trust people. Because of the princess, I no longer consider my magical power a misfortune. Now I can laugh naturally. Now I have hope for the future to come. All of this...because the princess accepted me as her friend. I want to become strong—not to hurt others, but to protect.*

"Aaah," I grunted and ruffled my hair. "All I want is to stay by her side forever." A childish wish overflowed from within me, but it was how I genuinely felt.

"Yeah," Teo agreed without laughing. With a distant gaze, he murmured, "That's all we want, and yet it's absurdly hard to do."

Internally, I felt the same, though I didn't have the energy to affirm his words aloud. *I wonder if the princess would be appalled if she saw how cowardly I am.*

# The Reincarnated Princess Doubts

One week passed after the stressful interview with my father. On the surface, my peaceful days continued. But, as my father had declared, the security around the castle had been bolstered, and the number of personnel within the castle and around my room had noticeably increased. Klaus was still my only personal guard, but I didn't know if that would hold true in the future.

If things followed the plot of *Hidden World*, Klaus would be selected as the shrine maiden's guard, which meant that I would get a new personal guard. Just the thought that Sir Leonhart might become my guard made my face slacken blissfully. On top of that, I kept recalling the events of our hallway conversation. My euphoria was getting so bad that it was almost a hindrance to my daily life.

*But it's impossible not to remember that moment... I mean, come on! Sir Leonhart blushed because of me. How could I not have any expectations after that? Sir Leonhart looked so cute when he was blushing and awkwardly looking away. I always see his cool side, so getting a glimpse of his cute side really hits me right in the heart. It feels like he's letting his guard down around me. Oh, I'm over the moon.*

*If he's constantly by my side, then maybe I'll see him relax on occasion. I want to witness him sneeze or yawn or even see him with some bedhead! Please note: I will not listen to any remarks about how I'm acting like a maniac.*

I fantasized wildly about Sir Leonhart becoming my personal guard, but if I thought about it rationally, I knew there was no way he would ever be assigned to guard me. It didn't matter how much of an eyesore I was to Lapter—the king and crown prince would surely take priority over me.

*If they wanted to ruin our country, they'd aim for my father first and my brother second. Also, after we summon the shrine maiden here, she'll be the most important person to protect. We're selfishly wrapping her up with our world's problems, so we'd better return her to her parents safe and sound.*

*Hmm. Isn't there any way to solve our demon lord problems without*

*summoning the shrine maiden? Dragging a high school girl into all this is just guilt inducing... Who are we to involve a cute girl, one made of sugar and spice and everything nice, in our war?*

*I still don't know what methods father has in mind, but, if it's too dangerous, I'd better prepare myself to object. But if I do...he'll definitely demand I offer up an alternative. And I doubt I could find an alternative when, even after all the research my father put in, he ended up proposing a plan that sounds as feasible as catching a cloud.*

*Still, I should do whatever I can. That's what I've always done up until now. Giving up is something that can be done at any time, and that time isn't now.*

I stood up and called out to my exclusive guard. "Klaus. There's something I wish to research, so I'm off to the library."

"Understood," he acknowledged with a smile.

We left my room together. Two royal knights were standing outside my door. One was Dennis, a male knight who'd entered the royal guard at the same time as Klaus. He was a sociable man who looked like he had many friends. In my previous world, Japanese people might have called him a mood maker—someone who livens up the atmosphere.

The other knight was Hans, a young man who appeared to be around twenty years old. He had a solid build, but there was still some baby fat on his face, so he might have been in his teens. His expression was rigid, possibly due to his nerves. Our eyes met and the youth's face was instantly dyed bright red. I was so surprised by how brightly his face was glowing that my eyes almost shrank into two little black dots, just like you'd see in anime.

Klaus's brows furrowed when he noticed what was going on between Hans and me. He quickly stepped in front of me as if to hide Hans from my eyes.

"K-Klaus?"

"I apologize for the delay. Let's depart for the library." Klaus hadn't made me wait at all, but his smile was too intense to argue with. When I glanced behind him, I saw that he didn't have any intention of moving. "There is nothing here for you to pay heed to."

I had no one to turn to, and I didn't have much reason to press the matter, so I obediently began moving toward the library.

After we'd walked for a while, Klaus spoke. "Lady Rosemary. I have a single request I'd like to ask of you." It was a commendable way to ask for something, which was unusual for him.

If it were a personal request, I would have turned it down instantly, but judging from the thin smile on his face, it seemed to be work related.

I decided to listen to what he had to say. "What is it?"

"Unless it is out of necessity, please do not look a man in the eyes."

Taken aback by his unexpected entreaty, my eyes almost turned into two little pinpricks once again. "May...I ask why?"

"Men are creatures who misunderstand when their eyes lock with those of a beautiful woman."

It was apparent what he was implying: Hans had blushed because I had stared at him too much, and I should stop doing anything that could be misconstrued.

It was unusual for Klaus to scold me, but I was more surprised that he'd described me as a beautiful woman. He wasn't complimenting me in his reverent, over-the-top manner. No, because he'd said it so plainly, it'd actually sounded like an objective statement.

*I've been called cute before, but I don't think anyone has ever called me beautiful...probably because of my age. And I've never been told to be careful about giving men the wrong idea. That's the kind of warning people give to women in the prime of their youth. Am I old enough to be seen as a woman and not a girl? Does Sir Leonhart view me that way now too?*

I could feel my cheeks redden. Seeing that, Klaus stopped in his tracks—his cheeks were flushed just like mine and his brows were raised in anger.

"Just like that!"

*Why is he mad at me?! I don't understand.*

"I know who you are thinking about when you make that expression. But if other men saw that, they would, without a doubt, misunderstand!"

*Wow, Klaus, you're amazing. I can't believe you noticed I was fawning over Sir Leonhart. You truly have been with me for a long time now. This is a strange experience... I'm being lectured by Klaus on our way to the library. It really wasn't just my imagination—I have gained more motherly figures around me.*

"Do you understand?" he asked.

His spiteful gaze caused me to shrug without thinking and agree. "Y-Yes. I understand."

*I'm not scared, but I feel like running away. Lately, I've been getting told off because I'm thickheaded. I'm concerned about that, and I'd like to fix it, but people can't change their personalities that easily, you know...*

*Regardless, I must improve.*

*And besides, since I'm at an age at which people view me as a grown woman, I must, as Klaus said, draw a line concerning how I behave toward men. The only head I want to turn is Sir Leonhart's—he's the only person whose touch I want to feel.*

I recalled the sensation of his large hands and steeled my resolve. "I'm sorry, Klaus. I'll be more careful going forward."

"Good. Please do." Klaus's hard expression softened back to normal.

When we reached the library, I read all the history and magic books I could find from cover to cover. Naturally, I didn't find any new information. I wanted to review some books on the demon lord, but those were all in my father's private study, and the only ones left in the library were fairy tales. The page I currently had open depicted a battle between some soldiers and a sorcerer possessed by the demon lord.

Suddenly, I remembered something.

"Come to think of it..." I muttered.

*Lapter tempted Captain Lieber by saying that his wife could be saved if she became the demon lord's avatar. This implies that becoming the demon lord's avatar will heal you. But, something else bothers me: did Captain Lieber's wife have any magical power? It's possible that Lapter tricked him from the*

*beginning, and they'd never intended to make his wife the demon lord's avatar. Or...perhaps my assumption that the demon lord amplifies the vessel's magical power is incorrect.*

I had holed myself up in the library to find an alternate plan to deal with the demon lord, but instead, I'd only uncovered a new mystery to think about.

# The Personal Guard's Hardship

"Hans," I said in a low voice, not trying to hide my displeasure.

He flinched when I called out to him. "Yes, sir!"

Hans whipped around to face me, straightening his back. He looked pale and was breaking out in a cold sweat, so he was likely aware of what had put me in such a foul mood.

We were near the guard room, so a few curious guards were watching us. I glared at them, wordlessly conveying that this was not a spectacle for their entertainment. More than half of them took off, and only the stubborn ones stayed. I saw my contemporary, Dennis, among them.

"Klaus, don't be too hard on the young'uns," he heckled.

My brows furrowed. "Then, Dennis, you get over here too."

"Urgh," Dennis groaned. "I regret poking the hornet's nest."

I shot him a look before turning away, and he grudgingly followed. Once the three of us reached an area with no one else around, I stopped.

"You know why I brought you over here, don't you?" I began.

"Yes, sir," Hans affirmed.

"What is your duty? Tell me."

"Yes, sir. My duty is to protect Her Highness the Princess!"

"That's right. Then let me ask you this—are you fit to be a guard if you lose yourself and become mesmerized by your charge?"

Hans was tongue-tied, but Dennis, who was standing next to him with eyes half-open, muttered, "Are you one to talk?"

I ignored Dennis. After all, it was my principle to not dwell on the past. "Our job is to pay attention to our surroundings and quickly catch wind of any danger. Let go of any frivolous feelings."



Hans's shoulders drooped. He apologized after a moment, seeming deeply ashamed. "Forgive me." With the way his large body shrank, he looked like a big dog that had just been scolded.

It wasn't my intention to demoralize him—I just wanted to make the point that it would be trouble if he remained dispirited and feckless. "Do not forget the pride of being entrusted as an escort to Her Highness, the Princess."

Hans raised his face in surprise. As my words sank in, his expression tightened.

"Be ready to respond to anything instantaneously," I continued, "and always remain calm."

"Yes, sir!"

"You must be alert at all times. Do not overlook even the smallest irregularity."

"Yes, sir!"

"From now on, in Her Highness's presence, do not let that idiotic expression show on your face."

Up until that point, Hans had been responding to my words in a loud, clear tone, but he suddenly went silent. His gaze, which had been looking straight ahead at me, started dropping down to the ground as if it were gradually losing to gravity.

"Your reply?" I pressed in a low growl.

However, I did not receive the confident reply I'd been fishing for.

"I..." he murmured.

"You...?"

"I...will work hard..."

Upon hearing his faltering response, a vein popped out on my forehead. A thug-like "Huh?!" inadvertently slipped out of me. "What's with that half-assed reply? Are you spurning me?"

"N-No, sir! There are just things I can and cannot do... That's all..."

“You can’t do it? Ridiculous! Just do it.”

“Even if you order me to, I...” Hans looked at me with teary eyes, causing me to scowl at him.

Dennis stepped in, wearing a forced smile on his face. “Okay, Klaus, that’s enough. How about you take a moment to calm down.” He waved his hand in appeasement, looking at me with a lax, gentle smile.

He then lightly jabbed me with the back of his hand, and I swallowed the rest of my admonitions. I just held my tongue and glowered.

Dennis turned his attention to Hans. “And you—don’t be foolishly honest. Learn to be more flexible with your answers when the time calls for it.”

“Forgive me,” the young guard replied.

“Hey!” I instinctively interjected. “I can’t let that slide, Dennis. Don’t irresponsibly teach him to lie.” The conversation had started to go in a more undesirable direction than I’d originally intended.

I grabbed Dennis’s shoulders, but his expression became exasperated. “It’s your fault for forcing unreasonable demands onto this guy.”

“When did I ask anything unreasonable from him?”

Dennis sighed, pushing my hands away. He tousled his hair and glared at me. “Listen here,” he prefaced. “Telling a man to not admire a beautiful woman is the same as telling him to quit being a man.”

His objection to my behavior was so blunt that I was stunned silent, and he continued before I could voice my complaints.

“Don’t get on my case for being disrespectful, okay? I just chose my words carefully so that they’d be easy for you to understand.”

Dennis stopped glaring at me when he saw that I was pressing my lips tightly shut.

“It’s a man’s instinct to be drawn to gorgeous women. No matter how disciplined we are as knights, we can’t resist our instincts. Not to mention that Her Highness is a peerless beauty. It’s impossible not to be taken in by her charm.”

“Don’t look at Lady Rosemary indecently.”

Dennis’s reproachful eyes clearly said, “*Ugh. This guy is such a pain in the neck.*”

“I’m not looking at her like that. I was just stating the general consensus.”

“I wonder about that,” I replied dubiously.

Dennis looked down and lifted his hands defensively. “It’s true. In the first place, Her Highness’s beauty is too angelic to look upon with wicked eyes.”

Hans nodded fervently in agreement. “Her Highness is so beautiful and pure that it’s hard to believe I exist in the same world as her. And yet, she is not arrogant in the slightest—she even treats her servants with kindness. I can understand why people go as far as to call her a goddess.”

Hans’s eyes narrowed with ecstasy. I glared at him and he hastily covered his mouth. I could tell from his face that he was thinking, “*Crap, I went and said too much.*”

“I’ve been watching over her since she was young and I’m still entranced by her beauty—it’s no wonder the younger knights are knocked off their feet.” Dennis turned to me. “Klaus, he’s not doing any real harm, so cut him some slack.”

That irresponsible remark made me clam up sullenly.

*It’s true. Lady Rosemary is absolutely stunning. She’s always had fine features, but I’ve witnessed her growth firsthand over these past few years. Her slender arms and legs have grown, and her figure has feminine curves now. In the past, her round face made her look like an adorable little girl, but now, she’s turned into a beautiful woman.*

She was like a butterfly that had just emerged from its chrysalis, a beauty that had bloomed so magnificently it would turn any head. Lady Rosemary naturally attracted people’s attention wherever she walked. The knights making their rounds, chamberlains in the middle of work, maids and gardeners who were toiling away—men and women of all ages could not help but let out a sigh of admiration when they saw Lady Rosemary.

It was impossible not to adore someone who possessed not only miraculous beauty but also an immaculate heart. Though I understood that, I couldn't accept it. There was no real harm in people feeling that way, but I didn't like what I didn't like. It felt somehow diminishing to my precious master.

"Come on, just allow him to admire an unattainable flower from afar."

"Don't liken her to something as tawdry as a flower."

"You're seriously unshakable..." Dennis said with a hollow laugh.

I merely sniffed in reply.

"A flower... That's right, Her Highness is just like a flower," Hans muttered to himself. "Delicate and sweet... I bet she smells wonderful enough that you'd want to breathe in her scent forever."

Hans looked like a child who was presenting his prized possession, and that made something snap audibly within me. Dennis detected my mood plummeting and paled. "Ah, crap," he muttered. But Hans didn't seem to have heard it.

*Ah yes, that's quite some nerve. I'll at least applaud you for having the courage to say that in front of me.*

"Hans." I produced a voice lower than I'd imagined I could. It almost didn't sound like it'd come from me but from something that crawled deep within the bowels of the earth.

Hans looked up at me instinctively and froze when he saw my expression. Mouth half-open, his face grew paler and paler. It was a rather funny sight to see.

"Come to the training grounds after work for one month. I'll give you some lessons."

A hoarse little squeak escaped Hans's lips. "N-No, um... Uh, I'm sure you'll be exhausted, so I couldn't possibly ask you to accompany me in my training..."

"Come now, it's not a big deal. It's for the sake of my dear junior after all."

Hans shook his head vigorously. Pale didn't do his pallor justice—he was white as a ghost now. I felt like a beast playing with its cornered prey, and the

corners of my mouth tugged up into a smirk.

“I’ll straighten you out.”

Accepting that there was no stopping me, Dennis patted Hans’s shoulder.  
“Stay strong,” he told the young knight.

# The Reincarnated Princess in High Spirits

Klaus was not available when I wanted to go out today, a rather unusual occurrence.

*I guess even Klaus, who prioritizes me, can't be by my side 24-7, 365 days a year. Nevertheless, when I get up at a moment's notice, Klaus is the one who always appears out of nowhere. Well, even he needs to eat and take breaks. He does take days off sometimes, albeit extremely rarely. And yet, somehow, it feels like he always knows exactly where...*

*I think I'll be spooking myself if I delve into the matter any further, so let's stop there.*

Anyway, today was one of those scarce days when a knight besides Klaus was acting as my escort. Even if I wanted to go out, Klaus would not show up.

I had time right now, so I wanted to see how the Khuer tribe was settling in, but I felt awkward dragging around a guard I wasn't familiar with. Just as I was wondering what to do, Sir Leonhart came by...right at the perfect time.

When I asked him to come with me, he readily accepted, meaning Sir Leonhart would be coming along to visit the Khuer tribe. *What a wonderful day! Not only do I get to see Lily and the others, but I can also spend time with Sir Leonhart!*

He was now walking next to me, and when he saw my joyful expression, he smiled too as if infected by my cheery mood.

"I'm sure you've been busy, so you must be looking forward to talking with them at your leisure."

"Yes. But there's one more thing I'm happy about," I replied honestly.

Sir Leonhart mulled over my words. "One more thing?" he repeated, blinking several times. "So there's another reason for your delight?"

"That's right." I nodded. *One exceptionally good reason.*

Sir Leonhart's gaze wandered around the halls as he tried to guess why. "Is it because the weather is fine today?"

"I do like sunny days...but that's not why."

"Because it's warm?"

I silently shook my head. *I enjoy warm days and sunny weather, but they're no match for the reason I'm overjoyed today. If Sir Leonhart were by my side, I'd love rainy weather and cold days all the same.*

I peeked at Sir Leonhart, who was still pondering. Finally, in a tone that sounded as if he were disclosing a secret, he asked, "Can you give me a hint?"

"My reason is standing right next to me," I told him with a beaming smile.

Sir Leonhart's eyes widened and he visibly stiffened for a few seconds. He looked away and covered his mouth, but I could see that his cheeks and ears had turned slightly pink.

"Please don't tease me," he said, glancing at me out of the corner of his eyes. He looked a bit angry, but I wasn't scared—after all, he was blushing.

"I'm not teasing you," I replied, staring at him fixedly.

Sir Leonhart's brows lowered, and his expression turned troubled. "You mustn't look a man directly in the eyes like that."

This time, my eyes widened. I'd heard that line before. "Klaus told me the same thing the other day."

Sir Leonhart raised his head up. "Klaus did?" His brow wrinkled quizzically. "And what exactly did he say?"

"He told me not to give men any misunderstandings." I summarized my scolding as briefly as possible.

The creases in Sir Leonhart's forehead deepened at that. *The embarrassed, upset expression up until now wasn't scary at all...but this expression looks very terrifying. All he did was narrow his eyes, but I can feel the intensity.*

"S-Sir Leonhart...?"

"That implies that something happened...something that would cause a

misunderstanding.”

For some reason, I felt uncomfortable, like I was being reprimanded. “I made eye contact with someone, that’s all,” I replied without looking at him.

Sir Leonhart gently touched my cheeks and lifted my face. I could feel his heat through his gloves and I was hyperaware that he was touching me. My face was rapidly warming up, and it felt like his jet-black eyes had the power to halt my breath.

“Really?” There was not a hint of blame in his low voice—it was filled only with sincerity. His clear black eyes were fixed on me, so I was in no position to lie. I thought my heart might burst.

“Really... All that happened was...my eyes met with a knight’s and his face turned red. Klaus warned me to be careful.” There was nothing for me to feel guilty about, but I still responded in a quiet whisper.

“I see...” Sir Leonhart sighed, then removed his hand from my cheek.

Even after he let go, my heart continued to pound like a beating drum. It felt like I had just sprinted at my maximum pace for as long as I could manage...like I was struggling to breathe. The place where his hand had touched my face felt unexpectedly hot. My cheeks were probably bright red. I fanned myself with my hand in an attempt to cool myself off.

I peeked at Sir Leonhart out of the corner of my eye to see how he was doing, but our eyes met instead. I hadn’t expected it so my shoulders trembled in surprise. A bitter smile formed on Sir Leonhart’s face. If it wasn’t just my imagination, I would have even said he looked a bit sad.

“I apologize for thoughtlessly touching you... You must have been frightened.”

“I-I wasn’t frightened!” Though I immediately denied it, I ended up stuttering and forgetting how to speak midway through.

Sir Leonhart showed me a pained smile that clearly communicated, “*I know.*”

*He’d see through any fib I tried to tell. I’m extremely poor at lying...so much so that it’s a fatal weakness. I have to explain my feelings properly.*

“I’m sorry... I was frightened. It was a little scary,” I admitted in a tiny voice,



looking down.

“Uh-huh,” Sir Leonhart gently replied, encouraging me to continue.

“But I was more excited than scared.”

“Huh?”

He sounded dumbfounded so I found the courage to raise my head. He gaped at me, looking as flabbergasted as he’d sounded.

*Why is he surprised? I thought he’d have gotten the message that I love him already.*

I tilted my head and looked up at him. “I could never dislike being touched by you.”

Sir Leonhart’s eyes shot wide open and a small, shocked noise escaped him. His lips were now pursed tightly together. In an attempt to hide his reddening face, he turned to the side, covered his eyes, and sighed.

“Princess... This is what I meant...” he told me wearily.

But his words lacked any meaning to me. *And what exactly did you mean? Can you be more specific?*

# The Reincarnated Princess's Slumber

About one month after we returned from the north, Captain Lieber's death was publicly announced. It was declared that he'd been on a mission and the country had lost contact with him around the mountains near the northeastern border. A little ways from the main road, traces of a fall were discovered—someone had slipped into a ravine. After investigation, it was concluded that Captain Lieber had lost sight of the road during a storm and fallen to his death.

The news that one of the top five knights in Nevel had passed away shook the country to its core.

A funeral without any remains was held for only the captain's closest friends and family. Vice-captain Isaac Walter was promoted to captain of the northern fortress, while the platoon sergeants would temporarily take turns fulfilling the duties of second-in-command until the position was finalized. This was all a temporary measure until new personnel were sent from the royal capital.

The result was just as I'd predicted—only a handful of people knew the truth behind Captain Lieber's death. And ultimately, even I didn't know what had become of him (and I likely never would) since I wasn't involved in the affairs of the nation.

*Even so...please allow me to hope that he's still alive.*

I turned over in bed. My eyes were shut, but I didn't feel sleepy at all. Nothing would come from mulling over the matter, but my brain couldn't stop thinking about what had become of Captain Lieber. Finally, I gave up on sleep and sat up. Darkness shrouded my room, and the only illumination came from faint beams of moonlight shining through the gaps in my thick curtains. Morning was still far away.

I left my bed. Exposed to the cool night air, my body, which had been warmed by my blanket, quickly became cold. I hastily threw a shawl over my shoulders and walked over to the window.

Just as I was about to open the curtains...I stopped.

*I want to gaze up at the moon for a change of pace, but I shouldn't. If I blithely walk out onto the balcony to enjoy the moon, I'm practically signaling to any potential assassins that they should take me out now.*

Though I gave up on stepping outside, it didn't change the fact that I'd been unshackled from the ball and chain of drowsiness. I didn't feel like returning to bed, so I stayed by the window and stared up at the night sky from between the curtains.

The pale-blue waning gibbous moon floated high in the sky. *I think this is what the moon looked like in the Vintian village. When Sir Leonhart returned from escorting Prince Nacht to the capital, the moon was about this full.* I still remembered Sir Leonhart's smile when he saw that I was safe and sound.

*I wonder how Sir Leonhart feels about Captain Lieber's death? Hopefully he knows what truly became of the captain and came to terms with it easily. But if he (like me) doesn't know the truth behind Captain Lieber's fate... My heart aches just thinking about it. Even though I only knew the captain for a short while, I'm still having a hard time coming to terms with losing him. I'm sure Sir Leonhart's pain would be far greater—after all, he'd been such close friends with Captain Lieber.*

I'd unconsciously put too much force into clenching my hands, creating wrinkles in the thick curtains. Leaning my head against the window, I closed my eyes and looked down. The chill of the glass helped cool down my head.

*There's no answer to my worries. I'm not allowed to ask anyone about the matter, so I'll just have to accept Captain Lieber's death and live with it on the surface. Though, how long have I been doing that already?*

Suddenly, I heard a thump—it sounded as if something had fallen. I raised my head and looked behind me, but I didn't spot anything out of place in my room. There wasn't anything new on the ground, and Nero was sleeping peacefully in his basket by my pillow on the bed.

The noise hadn't sounded close; I'd only picked up the distant noise precisely because it was the dead of night. *Did something fall over outside?* I tilted my head and returned to peering out the window.

At that instant, a shadow fell over me. My already dim vision went darker, and for a moment, I wondered if the moon had been obscured.

*Odd. There wasn't a single cloud around earlier,* I thought as I strained my eyes. My gaze was suddenly met by a pair of eyes peering at me out of the darkness.

"Huh?!" I yelped in surprise.

My heart jumped with such a start that I thought it had flipped upside down. I reflexively leaped back, away from the window, but my legs wouldn't move any farther. Alarms were blaring inside my head, though I didn't dare avert my attention. The eyes fixed upon me narrowed into crescent moons.

Whoever was standing outside rapped on my window with the back of their index finger. They were asking me to open up with such a languid motion that my vigilance dropped slightly.

As my eyes grew accustomed to the dim lighting, I realized that the face in the darkness was a familiar one.

This face was charming, like a prince's from a shojo manga, and the corners of his lips were pulled up into a grin. His smile had seemed affable in the sunlight, but in the darkness, it looked more like the snarl of a large, dangerous beast baring its fangs.

"Ratte?"

He lightly tapped on the glass once more when he heard me call his name, mouthing, "Open. Up."

I didn't quite understand what was going on, but I unlocked the glass door leading out to the balcony. The hinges let out a high-pitched squeak as I swung them outward. When the door was half-open, I snapped out of my stupor and stopped myself. Immediately, I tried to close it, but Ratte displayed his superb reflexes and instantly jammed his foot in the gap before I could shut it fully.

The light faded from Ratte's eyes, and the smile disappeared from his handsome face. It was so terrifying that even a horror movie might've jumped with fright. He forced his hands in the open crack of the door and wrenched it open. Helpless as a bean sprout, I didn't stand a chance at stopping him. Once

he'd stepped into my room, a smile returned to Ratte's face.

"Good evening, Princess. It's a beautiful night, isn't it?"

"G-Good evening..." I managed to reply as I tried to keep my mouth from spasming.



“I finally get to see you. It’s been quite a while. Have you been well?”

“Yes. You seem to be the same as always, Ratte.”

He nodded like an innocent child, but I could sense tension in the air—the pressure he exuded was so intense that I struggled to resist the urge to back away.

“Sooo,” he drawled, “why did you try to lock me out just now?”

I’d gotten an inkling of it from his aura, but apparently, he didn’t fancy being shut out. Ratte was smiling, but I could tell he was...displeased. My brows lowered pitifully. “I’m sorry.”

“I wasn’t asking for an apology. I just wanted to know why you wanted to lock me outside.”

*Apology rejected.* I whimpered quietly. *I don’t think he’ll forgive me unless I tell him the truth. It’s embarrassing to admit, but I’ve got no choice here.*

I accepted my fate and opened my mouth. “I just thought...um, it wouldn’t be good to invite a man into my room in the middle of the night.”

Ratte’s eyes went wide. His expression seemed to ask, “*What is this kid saying?*”

I wanted to run away...but I kept going with my explanation. “I wasn’t thinking you’d do something strange or anything, okay?! I-I know I’m being overly self-conscious... But I thought it’d be best if I didn’t do anything to tarnish my name before I’m married, that’s all...” My voice trailed off weakly at the end.

*I want to dig a hole, a deep one, and jump in. Someone please bury me... I’m so ashamed.* I covered my hot cheeks with my hands and I thought I might tear up pathetically. *I am a master at making people misunderstand me.*

“Princess, has no one ever told you you’re missing something up there?”

“There’s no need to rub it in...” I was probably red up to my ears by now. I was so embarrassed that I couldn’t look up at him.

“Well, you’re certainly an unpredictable one, but I mean that in a good way.”

A low chuckle escaped from Ratte.

*Is being overly self-conscious ever a positive thing?* He'd been kind enough to console me, but I glared up at him reproachfully, taking my displeasure out on him. Ratte looked extremely amused and the strained mood completely dissipated.

"So, you didn't think I came here to kill you?"

My eyes widened, which was all the answer he needed to see.

Seeming happy, Ratte's eyes narrowed. "You truly are a funny one, Princess. The knight captain must be a happy man."

"Huh?! Th-Th-Th-Th-That's not true..." I stammered magnificently as I held my feverish cheeks. I'd become even more embarrassed, though this time, in a different sense. No one had even proposed to me...and here I was, acting like a maiden about to be married. Unfortunately, no one was around to shut me down for my unbecoming behavior.

"I'm working hard to protect you, so please include me in your trousseau, okay?" he whispered into my ear.

I didn't process his words immediately. *My...trousseau? You want me to include a handsome young man in my dowry? Uh, isn't that a bit too novel?*

Before I could retort, Ratte turned around.

"Hey, Ratte—"

But he spoke up, cutting me off. "Oh, come to think of it, I heard a new dog was foisted upon Crow."

"A dog?" I parroted idiotically, unable to keep up with the sudden change in topic.

"It's a big dog. In fact, it's one that you picked up, Princess. Crow has to babysit it." Ratte turned to look at me over his shoulder and brought a finger up to his lips. "It's a secret though."

*A big dog that I picked up?* No matter how hard I scoured through my memories, I didn't remember doing such a thing.



Suddenly, a smile that was as chummy as a dog's flashed across my mind's eye.

"Do you mean—huh?"

I'd only taken my eyes off of him for a few seconds, but by the time I looked back up, Ratte had already disappeared from view. Silence returned to the balcony—there wasn't a human in sight. Feeling like I'd been duped by a sly fox, I closed the glass doors.

"I'm free...to believe that he's alive, right?" I murmured, returning to bed.

And unlike earlier, when I closed my eyes, I was welcomed by a tranquil slumber.

# The Reincarnated Princess Deliberates

A flock of white birds flew in formation across the clear blue sky. Flowers bloomed in the garden in a myriad of colors; it was quite a feast for the eyes. I watched the garden out of the corner of my vision as I strolled down the corridor. The warm breeze lightly brushed against my cheek, bringing the sweet fragrance of flowers with it a moment later.

The seasons had changed from spring to early summer. I'd been notified that the magic circle was near completion, so I was currently heading to the room where Miss Irene was waiting.

My surroundings were peaceful today as well. Ever since I'd been informed of the potential that my life was in danger, I hadn't, not once, felt any imminent threat. I owed my safety to not only the knights who guarded me, but also to those protecting me from the shadows. The faces of Crow, Ratte, and our new spy came to mind.

*He's a deft one, so he probably adapted quickly. Or perhaps it took him a while to settle in because his large build is difficult to hide... Maybe he was scolded often. I can't confirm how he's doing, but I hope he's well.* My lips broke out into a smile.

"Did something pleasant happen?"

The question jolted me back to reality. I looked to Sir Leonhart, who was standing beside me. My personal guard was still Klaus, but when I was needed for discussion regarding the demon lord, Sir Leonhart was typically the one who came to escort me.

*How thoughtful of you, father...or probably not. Only a restricted few people are privy to the information disclosed in these meetings, so I suspect that my father's "generosity" has more to do with keeping things secretive.* Access to the area around Miss Irene's room had been limited before, but things had become even stricter since they'd begun research on the magic circle. And of course, out of necessity, the personnel guarding the area had also been carefully selected.

“Um...” I was about to say something ambiguous like, “*It’s nothing,*” but I stopped myself.

*Sir Leonhart’s complexion looks healthy and his eyes are not muddled. I’m sure he knows about his whereabouts. So...yes, that’s right.*

“Yes. Something good did indeed happen.” I smiled broadly.

Sir Leonhart’s eyes went wide for a moment and then, as if dazzled by something, he squinted and gently returned my smile. “May I ask what happened?”

“That’s a secret,” I replied proudly, a finger lifted up lightly against my lips.

Sir Leonhart made a funny noise with his throat. “A secret, you say?”

“Yes, it’s a secret.”

“That’s unfortunate to hear.”

Sir Leonhart’s professional tone seemed to break from time to time. It made me feel as if the distance between us had shrunk, and I felt overjoyed by the prospect.

While I was slowly savoring my happiness, we arrived at our destination. Miss Irene had come to greet us and, with a smile, she said, “It’s been a long time, Princess. I’ve been expecting you.”

It had certainly been a while, but she was as stunning as ever. Her lustrous black hair was arranged in an updo and her skin was pure white, lacking a single blemish. Her slender but toned body was attired in a black robe (proof that she was a sorcerer) layered over a light-gray dress. The dress had a simple design; minimal lace decorated her décolleté and hems, and there was a modest flower embroidered near her chest. However, those dark, plain colors did not give off a gloomy impression—rather, they enhanced her elegant appearance, a look only possible because Miss Irene was the one wearing it.

*I want to become an adult who can stylishly wear simple dresses like Miss Irene.* I gazed at her with longing eyes and she looked me over from head to toe in return.

“Oh my, Princess. You’ve become much more beautiful in the time since I last

saw you.”

“Huh?” I was confused. I hadn’t expected to be praised by the very person I’d been captivated by. “Do you really believe so?”

“Yes. Anyone can see that you’ve become a fine lady.”

Bewildered, I looked down at myself. *I guess I have grown taller. I’m not as curvy as I had hoped to become...but I think my figure has developed into that of a woman’s.*

My dress was a calm blue. I’d taken a liking to the indigo hue the moment I’d laid eyes on it. My décolleté, sleeves, and waist were decorated with an intricate pattern embroidered with gold and silver thread. The skirt had the same pattern in silver thread, and the hem of my skirt was finished with a mix of frills and lace. The effect was a cute yet modest look.

I had purposefully chosen this dress with the intention of appearing like an adult. *I’m glad she sees me that way.*

“With your beauty, no one can treat you like a child any longer.” Miss Irene smiled sweetly and looked at Sir Leonhart. “Right?”

Suddenly prompted to agree, Sir Leonhart froze for a moment, seeming at a loss for words. He quickly regained his composure and returned her smile. “Yes. I agree.”

Miss Irene maintained her smile and murmured in a soft tone, “Dear me, what a boring man.”

*Wait a minute... Could it be that even Miss Irene knows about my feelings for Sir Leonhart? When and where did she find out? Hold on. I thought I was concealing my feelings well...but haven’t they been leaked to just about everyone around me?*

Looking amused, Miss Irene turned on her heel to lead us into her room. Sir Leonhart sighed as she did. It sounded like a sigh of relief, and I glanced up at him. Feeling the weight of my gaze, he averted his eyes and coughed.

“Please don’t stare so hard,” he whispered. I noticed that his ears had flushed. Feeling my own face turn a shade of red deeper than his, I looked

away.

“This way, please,” Miss Irene directed us.

Her voice brought me back to reality and I hastily responded, “Oh, yes!”

When I sat down on the sofa, Miss Irene shot me a meaningful look. Her eyes were thin with amusement as she silently giggled. *I don't think I can hide anything from this gorgeous lady.*

I surveyed the room in an attempt to calm myself. There was no one else here besides the three of us. I wasn't surprised that my father wasn't present, but Lutz and Teo were not around either. *I wonder if they're still working hard to finish the magic circle in a different room.*

Miss Irene sat down across from me and met my eyes. “I've called you here today because I wanted to explain our plan regarding the summoning and the demon lord.”

I straightened my back in response to Miss Irene's words. This was just what I'd been hoping to hear about. My father had told me I'd learn the details at a future date, but I'd still felt a little uneasy being in the dark about the specifics.

Since I was completely clueless about magic circles, it would've been pointless to have the intricate mechanisms and inner workings explained to me. I decided it would be enough if they at least told me the date we'd try this plan. And if push came to shove, I'd ask my father directly.

*Maybe he found out that I was searching for an alternative method because I'm opposed to summoning the shrine maiden. Did he beat me to the punch? Very possible. It is father we're talking about here...*

“This is all just conjecture based on the research we've been provided,” Miss Irene prefaced. She paused for a moment and then began her explanation. “First, I'd like to start with the demon lord's magical powers. You're probably aware, but most people who've become the demon lord's avatar were sorcerers.”

“Yes.” I nodded.

The help of powerful sorcerers was indispensable to us in our fight against the

mighty demon lord. Unfortunately, sorcerers were weak to physical attacks and often lost their lives during battle. It was believed that the demon lord's vessel would, on occasion, be one of those very sorcerers who had fallen.

People began to notice something after several battles with the demon lord—when the selected vessel wasn't a sorcerer, the demon lord was weaker than his past iterations. Of course, he was still not a being that could be bested one-on-one. In fact, he was far from helpless and could presumably wipe out a whole army with little effort. The demon lord was still the demon lord, even in a weakened state.

*However, if—just if—humans united together and fought... Yes, if we do, then it feels like we're close to reaching the demon lord's power.*

"But not all of his avatars were sorcerers," continued Miss Irene. "And when the demon lord did revive using vessels that weren't sorcerers, he was discernibly weaker. Therefore, we've deduced that the demon lord has the ability to amplify his avatar's magical powers."

Miss Irene's words affirmed my hypothesis that the demon lord was something like a magic amplification device.

"In other words, the greater his avatar's powers, the stronger the demon lord will be. If that's true, then he'd have no reason to choose vessels that weren't sorcerers. However, there have been a number of occasions on which he *did* select nonsorcerers. And from that, I drew another conclusion—I believe there are a few conditions that must be met for the demon lord to possess an avatar."

"Conditions?" I repeated.

"For example, one condition might be distance from the vessel...or perhaps time is somehow a factor."

"I see..." I muttered.

"It's possible the demon lord didn't actively choose a vessel that was not a sorcerer, but rather, he was *forced* to choose one."

*So if there were no suitable sorcerers nearby to possess, then he had to pick someone else as a substitute. This implies that the demon lord's movements are*

*limited without a vessel. Or maybe we can even presume that, without a vessel, the demon lord can only exist for a limited amount of time.*

I gave Miss Irene a brief summary of my theory and she nodded.

“It is thought that the demon lord needs magical power not only for combat but also to maintain himself,” she explained. “Think of it as something akin to nutrition. Though, again, this is all just conjecture.”

*Magical power for the demon lord is equivalent to food and water for a human? If that’s the case, then you’d think all would be well as long as we kept sorcerers away from the demon lord... But I guess it’s not that simple.*

“Another condition is the state of the vessel. I believe the vessel must be a human who has died very recently. However, based on the information from Lapter, this may be a misconception.”

“Perhaps the demon lord can select people who are biologically weak to an extent due to an injury or illness, even if they are not deceased?” I hypothesized.

Miss Irene’s eyes widened and, after a pause, she agreed. “Right. So you have noticed that as well, Princess.”

“The folk tales from Lapter suggested such a possibility.” We didn’t know whether their information was correct or not, but we couldn’t ignore it if we assumed the worst.

“We can’t predict what severity an injury or illness would need to be for the demon lord to possess someone. It’s possible that it is merely easier for the demon lord to possess a corpse rather than struggle against a living soul. But, if he can possess a living person, then...things will be much more difficult.” Miss Irene’s expression was grim.

My face paled. *If it doesn’t matter whether the vessel is dead or alive, then it’ll be significantly more trouble. In that case, if the demon lord escapes even once, it’s likely that things will be irreparable. I know we’re just theorizing and we don’t have much evidence to go off, but we have to operate assuming the worst.*

“B-But, if the demon lord can’t maintain his existence without magical power, there must be a way to handle him.” I forced myself to sound optimistic but I

failed to hide my unrest. Instead of assuaging the atmosphere of the room, Miss Irene's expression only harshened.

She hesitated for a moment, face grim. "At first, we thought that if we mages stayed away from the demon lord, it would be possible to rid the world of him. Unlike in the past, there are only a small handful of people who can use magic now."

I had a bad feeling because Miss Irene was speaking in the past tense. *Saying they thought this at first is the same as saying they think differently now. Only a small handful of people can use magic now; that much is true. And no one has confirmed the existence of any sorcerers outside of Nevel—even within our country, the number is small and falling by the year. If this is all true, it sounds like I need to change my approach to the issue.*

"Perhaps...being able to use magic and having magical power are two separate things...?" I muttered aloud.

Miss Irene looked astonished by my conclusion. "As I thought, you truly are an astute one, Princess." She hadn't agreed with me explicitly, but her words confirmed my suspicion.

Although I'd been the one to suggest it, I was surprised. *I didn't think that would be correct. I'm not happy I was right though. I was actually hoping she'd call my idea silly and laugh it off.*

"Is it possible that the citizens of our nation...no, all humans in this world may have some level of magical power?" I asked.

"In the past, everyone in the world could use magic. We believed that we gradually lost that power over time as we reproduced, but it's probable that our magical power is not zero."

*I guess it's something similar to a vestigial structure...like a coccyx? It sounds similar since the average person's powers have degenerated to the point of being unusable, but we've still retained the ability in some residual form. Even if we can't use magic, it's possible that we have a very minuscule amount of power.*

*Which means...no place in this world is safe.*



“And that’s where summoning a person from another world comes into play,” I said.

“Precisely. We aim to summon a person from a world where there is no trace of magic or magical power in the present or past.”

*A world without magic, huh. The world of my past life fits the bill—Earth. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to call it a world that closely resembles the one I used to live in. Regardless, if we have someone without any magical power, we could let go of any worry that they’d become the demon lord’s vessel.*

“After they’ve been summoned...what exactly will they do?”

*Let’s say the shrine maiden destroys the stone. Even if she doesn’t get possessed, all would fail if there were people from this world around her. We could make the perimeter off-limits, but there’s always a possibility of something going awry—whether by accident or design. Either way, it’s just too risky to leave the shrine maiden alone.*

“Don’t tell me... You’re not planning on foisting the stone upon the otherworlder and sending them back home with it, right?” I asked nervously.

A strained smile formed on Miss Irene’s face. “That is indeed one of our options.”

*Thought so...* Learning that my hunch had been correct, I pressed my hand against my throbbing head. *It’s the simplest and fastest way to solve the problem safely. But that only holds true for our world.*

“If our theory is correct and the demon lord cannot survive without feeding off of magical power, then it would be an effective method. However, if we’re incorrect, then we’d be foisting a calamity upon another world. So...that plan is our last resort.”

A small sigh of relief escaped from me. *If we found concrete proof of the connection between the demon lord and magical power, I’d gladly accept that plan. But I wouldn’t want to pass along a threat to my past life’s homeland.*

“We have one more goal for summoning someone from another world.”

“Another goal?” I parroted.

Miss Irene fell silent in thought for a moment before answering. “Calling it a goal may be misleading. You could say...well, I anticipate some interesting and unintended effects will come from summoning someone from another world.”

She continued to explain from there, but I was doubtful that I’d completely understood the conjecture.

*All right, let me try to summarize the parts I understand:*

*Crossing from world to world takes a heavy toll on both the vessel and the soul. For that reason, when someone does manage to cross the boundary between worlds, they gain some kind of great power. That power sleeps in the depths of your heart and awakens when your life is endangered...? It’s unclear whether this is a power granted by a being so powerful that we might call them a god.*

*Who knows how this unknown power works? But if the magical power we know of is yin, then this new power would be yang—negative energy and positive energy, so to speak. So, whoever is summoned would have an opposing power to what we have.*

*I get how father must’ve felt when he said this was an absurd story. It truly sounds like we’re trying to pin down a cloud.*

But, at the same time, I already knew...that a lovely girl, the embodiment of miracles themselves, existed.

# The Reincarnated Princess Reminisces

My takeaway from Miss Irene's explanation about summoning the shrine maiden and annihilating the demon lord was that...there was pretty much nothing for me to do. I had no knowledge about constructing magic circles, and after hearing the whole plan, no alternatives had come to mind. It felt like if I imprudently took action, I'd actually make things more dangerous. I concluded that the best action for me to take was to be docile so as to not trouble my guards.

Thus, I'd spent the past few days in dance lessons or having measurements for dresses taken—normal everyday activities for a noblewoman. One afternoon on such a peaceful day, my older brother visited me. It was a sudden, surprising visit while I was reading in my room, but I welcomed him in.

"It's been a while, Rose. Is everything the same as usual?"

"Yes. What about you, Chris...? You don't look well."

After my return from the northern fortress, I'd gone to see him once, but he'd seemed so busy that we hadn't really gotten to talk. He'd also looked pale, and evidently, his pallor had not improved with time.

"It's because I've been unable to see my cute little sister," he joked with a deadpan expression.

I didn't need to see him or hear his answer to understand that he was considerably busy. *He has the shrine maiden summoning and demon lord annihilation projects to think about. Then, there's also the problem of Lapter sending assassins after him—with Captain Lieber's death, the internal structure of the knights had to go through a big change. On top of that, there's the hospital facility that I requested father build. Things must be so hectic for him right now.*

*I'm sorry from the bottom of my heart that I'm just leisurely reading books.*

"If you're tired, please get some rest," I told him.

“Being in your company will heal me better than sleep will.”

“Please rest your body and mind rather than your heart.” With a straight face, my brother spouted sweet nothings to his little sister, but I brushed them aside. “I shall prepare tea, so please take a seat in the meantime.”

His gait was as steady as ever, but his pale visage worried me. I pushed on his back and forced him toward the sofa. Sir Leonhart was watching our twee sibling banter with warm eyes, causing me to feel a bit shy.

My older brother, who’d been going along with my demands without resisting, stopped for a moment as if he’d suddenly remembered something. He looked over his shoulder at Sir Leonhart. “Wait outside the room. I’ll call for you when it’s time to leave.”

Surprised by my brother’s orders, my eyes went round. Sir Leonhart’s smile looked forced, but he complied. “Understood.”

He took my own personal guard, Klaus, with him, and both knights exited my room.

“Is this all right?” I asked. It was so peaceful in the castle that sometimes it was easy to forget, but both my brother and I were currently targets for assassination. The only reason we didn’t feel like our lives were constantly in danger was due to the efforts of the people protecting us.

“I finished up my urgent work already. Surely it wouldn’t hurt to have some quality sibling alone time?”

“Okay, then I’ll brew tea—”

“It’s fine, there’s no need for that.” He beckoned me over and I sat next to him. “First, I want to give you this.” My brother pulled out a plain, cream-colored envelope.

I recognized the mark stamped on the red sealing wax. “Is that from Johan?”

“Yeah. It came with the rest of my mail, so I slipped out to deliver this too.”

I accepted the letter from him. *Johan should be returning home soon from studying abroad in Vint... Is it possible his stay will be extended by another year? Is that what this is about?*

“Chris, have you read it already?”

“Yes. He wrote that he’ll be a little late with his return. One of his close acquaintances passed away.”

I paled. “Goodness no... Don’t tell me...Lord Giaster?”

Chris nodded.

Heinz von Giaster was a lord who had presided over the western lands of Vint, but because of the crimes of his son, Philip, he’d been stripped of the position. His chronic heart condition had worsened, and he’d been bedridden.

“Johan is on his way to Grenze to attend the funeral. He won’t return to Nevel until next month or so.”

“I see...”

I’d only met Lord Giaster in person once, but it still hurt to hear news of his death. *Johan spent many years with him and took a liking to him, so he must be filled with even more sorrow. He may have known this was coming since he heard about the illness’s progression in advance...but the pain is no different.*

*Little brother, I wish Chris or I could be there for you. Oh, but Johan has a close friend with whom he can share his grief with. I’m sure he will be fine with Prince Nacht by his side.*

My brother caressed my lowered head. I looked up to meet tender eyes gazing at me affectionately.

“Let’s pamper him as much as he wants when he returns,” he said.

“I’m sure he’ll get angry and tell us not to treat him like a child though.”

We quietly laughed together.

“Now is the only time I can treat you two like children. After a year or two, you’ll both have grown up. You’ll drift away from me,” Chris murmured, his tone sad.

Seeing his forlorn expression, I blinked a few times. “Johan and I...will always be by your side, Chris.”

“You say that, but soon, you’ll be whisked away to be someone’s bride.”

My brother pouted and I could not hide the shock I felt at witnessing him acting like a petulant child. *I think I just saw something I may very well never see again.*

“A bride...?” I repeated to myself. Sir Leonhart’s face immediately came to mind. But I felt my brother’s gaze upon me and I hurriedly shook my head, chasing the delusion out of my mind. I tried to gloss over it by clearing my throat with a small cough. “That’s a story for the distant future. Besides, I *will* come visit you, even when I marry.”

*It’d be wonderful if I could marry Sir Leonhart, but realistically speaking, I can’t envision it happening yet. I’ve matured, but I’m still just a child. So, I’m going to work hard until I am a woman who is suitable for Sir Leonhart...*

*Especially with some more development in my chest area...*

I had told him my honest feelings, but Chris’s expression remained sullen. Seeing him look so desolate and doleful made my heart ache. *I feel like I’m saying my farewells to my parents the night before my marriage. I don’t even have a wedding date set, let alone a fiancé! I wonder why Chris is feeling so sentimental today. Is it because he’s overworked?*

“Chris, why don’t you rest here for a bit? I’ll wake you up in an hour.”

*I don’t mind if you lie down on my sofa, or you can even use my bed if you’d like.*

“Yes, I think I will.”

“Please use my sofa. Or I can prepare the bed if you’d prefer to nap there.”

“No, I’m fine here. Rose.”

“Yes?”

“Lend me your lap.”

“Yes...?” I’d just stood up from the sofa and I froze there.

*I think I heard something just now... Did I mishear?* I desperately tried to avoid facing reality, but when I looked up, my brother was patting the sofa.

“I want to lay my head on your lap.”

*Seems like I didn't mishear... I don't know how to react when you ask me with those eyes...*

I was standing straight as a board. Right as I wondered what was going through his head, Chris's brows lowered sadly.

"I can't?"

*"Urgh," I moaned. Staring at me like an abandoned puppy is unfair! I'm weak enough when it comes to my brother, and this makes me want to give in to anything he demands of me.*

I hesitated for a moment. In the end, I cast my eyes down and sighed. I sat down at the end of the sofa and lightly patted my lap to invite him to lie down. Chris's eyes narrowed joyfully and he rested his head on my lap. He had a gentle fragrance—the calming aroma of agarwood suited my brother well.

"Thank you, Rose."

"I will properly serve as your pillow, so rest well."

In a good mood, my brother nodded and closed his eyes. I draped a nearby lap blanket over him, though it barely covered his stomach. After all, my brother was over 170 centimeters tall now, and his long legs hung over the end of the sofa. The blanket might've been a bit too short, but it was better than nothing—he'd have to make do.

*All right then, what now? I can't exactly continue reading on top of my brother's face.* With nothing to do, I rudely stared at Chris's sleeping visage. His skin was like white porcelain, and as close as I was, I could not spot a single blemish. I brushed his platinum-blond bangs aside.

His forehead was well-defined and his eyebrows drew elegant lines across them. The bridge of his nose was sculpted, and his lips were thin. Each one of his features was perfectly arranged, following the golden ratio to a T.

*As always, he's so gorgeous that he'd make people sigh. God must've been fastidious about every single minute detail during my brother's creation.* I fantasized what that might've looked like, a god fussing over a human.

"In the past...we were in opposite positions," my brother said, eyes still

closed.

*He must be referring to when the sorcerers were kidnapped. Back then, I was spinning around in circles, thinking I must struggle alone. That night, Chris held me close and protected me.*

“You comforted me when I was agitated.”

“I didn’t know how to console you, so I might’ve made you cry more instead.”

In the past, I had viewed my brother as a perfect prince without a single flaw. But that had been a misconception on my part—he was inexperienced when it came to giving gentle pats on the head, and not knowing how to comfort someone must’ve worried him. Even though he had difficulty expressing himself, I knew he’d been flustered on the inside.

Chris had been uneasy, but he’d persisted, staying by my side, not because he was perfect but because he was kind. And...because he cherished Johan and me very much.

“When I saw you cry, I thought I was a pathetic, good-for-nothing brother.”

“Don’t say that. I’m fortunate to have been born as your little sister.” There were no lies or falsehoods in my words.

My brother’s eyelids slowly opened. His crystal clear, blue eyes peered at me and then gently narrowed. “I also feel blessed that I am your older brother, and Johan’s as well.”

Our gazes were locked for a moment, but then we both averted our eyes, abashed. *I’m so embarrassed, I think I’m going to abscond. I’m starting to feel mushy inside.*

“I must thank my stepmother for giving birth to two wonderful younger siblings.”

Hearing those unexpected words, I forgot my embarrassment for a moment and turned back to face my brother. His eyes were serious and there was not a hint of sarcasm or jest on his face...not that I could imagine my brother ever being sarcastic.

No, I knew he was being completely earnest. But I couldn’t accept what I’d



heard. *Mother has never shown any affection toward Chris. In fact, she abhors him. She's treated him poorly, but he's thankful to her instead of resentful... Is my brother a saint or something?*

Noticing how I'd stiffened and fallen silent, Chris looked troubled. "I mean it."

"I know you do. That's what makes it even more outlandish," I answered, perhaps too bluntly.

Chris smiled broadly. "You're so honest," he mused. "It's only natural that stepmother does not hold me in high regard, but I don't despise her much."

"That's because you're too bighearted." My tone came out more indignant than I'd intended.

*I wouldn't say I despise mother either. She did give birth to me, so I don't think I could ever truly hate her from the bottom of my heart. I just don't like her. Okay, well, maybe I really don't like her. But I can't turn a blind eye to how she's treated Chris.*

"This world is teeming with people who can spout beautiful pleasantries while hurling insults at you in their hearts...all without batting an eye. Wouldn't you say she's an honest person compared to those people?"

"Well...I guess so," I grudgingly agreed.

*Mother certainly isn't the type of person to act nice on the surface and torment others from the shadows. She's cold to Chris in front of everyone and she'll throw in cutting remarks at him regardless of who's around. But don't you think it's a bit too optimistic to say that's being honest...?*

"Also, she's a very devoted person. After all, His Majesty the King is infamously apathetic and indifferent, but she's continued to love him all this time."

He spoke of it as if he were watching over a child's first love—I couldn't tell you what I was feeling.

*I can't decide who is the older one between the two of them... Also, you're saying all this as if you're an outsider, but we're talking about your father and his second wife here! I wonder if Chris felt hurt when father married my mother.*

*It must've been onerous for a young child to lose his mother and then get a new one only a few years later. Had I been in his place, I doubt I could've come to terms with it. I understand in my mind that it's the duty of a king to have a queen, but my feelings are a different story.*

Seeing me clam up with doubt, Chris tilted his head to the side. "Rose?"

I hesitated for a moment and then mustered up the courage to ask. "Chris, when mother married father, were you sad?"

Chris looked down for a moment, ruminating over my question. "No, never. I don't remember my birth mother at all, and I had father. I also never worried about whether she would take father away or whether I'd lose my place here." He spoke matter-of-factly, and I knew he wasn't lying. "And apparently, my birth mother was not fond of the king."

"Really?" I asked, surprised.

"That's what I've heard," said Chris with a nod.

I only knew of Chris's mother from portraits. She was a delicate beauty who shared Chris's hair and eye colors. There was a resemblance in their noses and ears, but overall, she gave off a different impression than he did.

Apparently, she'd been a quiet person. Perhaps rather than hating our father, she'd feared him. Even if she had lived a long life, who knew if she would've been happy. My brother said all this to me with a distant look in his eyes. "If father had never married stepmother, then for my whole life, I likely would have never experienced familial love."

"Chris..."

"That's why I'm thankful to stepmother."

When I saw how peaceful Chris looked, I almost wanted to cry. Suddenly, I felt a mysterious sense of duty well up within me.

*I must protect his smile.*

"But," my brother added, "whether she is a good mother to the two of you is a separate issue. I hope you don't misunderstand that."

I nodded. "I don't hate mother... Well, I haven't interacted with her enough to

say whether I like or dislike her.”

*I haven't spent much time together with her, so there's been no chance for me to sort out my feelings or decide whether I hate her. At the very least, I'm sure she's not a good mother, but it's true she's not a wholly bad parent. I'm sure I'd hate her if she were a harsher and slyer person. But, mother is actually quite clumsy and awkward... I may even feel close to her in that regard.*

“Perhaps you'll be able to speak to her amicably when you're both a little older,” Chris said. He smiled bitterly. “Guess I shouldn't say that to a girl who's about to reach adulthood, huh...”

# Prince Grouchy Mourns

The funeral for the former frontier lord, Heinz von Giaster, was solemnly held in a light drizzle. I—Nacht von Ersta—had journeyed all the way to Grenze to attend the service. The deceased had wished for his funeral to be modest, with only a few people sending him off, but evidently his popularity would not oblige. In front of his tombstone stretched a never-ending line of people.

In spite of the unpleasant weather, men and women of all ages—from elderly folks propping themselves up with canes to young children still clinging to their mothers' hands—were wordlessly lined up to offer Lord Giaster flowers. I could hear weeping from not just one or two people, but from many, and that in itself proved how loved he was by his people.

“Lord Heinz was truly adored by many,” murmured Johan, the second prince from the neighboring country, as we watched the funeral procession from a distance.

His gaze was gentle and tranquil and yet also tinged with sadness. Most likely because he, too, was among those who'd adored Lord Giaster. It was easy to imagine what he was feeling since he had extended his stay in Vint instead of returning to Nevel as he'd originally planned.

“Our nation has lost a valuable individual.” Those acrimonious words came out of my throat accompanied by a sigh.

Now that I was the crown prince, I was once again reminded of our kingdom's vastness. My two eyes alone weren't sufficient to keep a grip on all the happenings just within the capital city, much less across the entire nation. I needed reliable people to keep a watchful eye on the borders, but those regions had their own working governmental structures. Sending ignorant personnel to the borders would be futile and merely deepen the rift between the crown and the outlands.

However, I could not turn a blind eye to the unspoken agreement that had been born between government officials and merchants—routine inspection

was necessary. Furthermore, if the wrong people were involved, the frontier would just become a hotbed for corruption. It was of utmost importance to send someone principled and trustworthy to keep an eye on the frontier.

“You need someone deeply loyal to the crown who is a staunch leader and adored by the people. There are only a handful of such proficient personages.” Johan was an outsider to Vint, but he summarized my nation’s dilemma with a restrained smile. And though he was from another country, he had readily assimilated into the city and displayed remarkable skill in rapidly building connections. He was also physically adept and a quick thinker. Nevel’s prince was a bit too much of a schemer for me to declare him wholly honest, but he was sincere toward those who’d gained his trust. As his friend, and as Vint’s crown prince, it pained me to let go of such talent.

“Johan. Why don’t you settle down here, in Vint?” I’d asked him this before as a joke and of course he’d rejected my invitation...but I decided to ask him again anyway.

“I will have to respectfully decline,” Johan curtly refused. “You’ll be concentrating your efforts on training new talent anyway. It won’t make much of a difference once I’m gone.”

*Sure, you’re not a force of a thousand men, but you could easily be on par with a hundred.* I decided to keep this thought to myself. I knew his answer would be the same no matter what I said.

“When I’ve cultivated ninety-nine talented individuals, I’ll happily receive you as my one hundredth with open arms.”

“Lord Heinz would scold you for being lazy,” said Johan as he let out a deep laugh. A nostalgic look glinted in his eyes—perhaps he was recalling the time he’d spent with the frontier lord. “That man may have seemed like he could do anything, but apparently, he failed much in his youth. I heard that, although Lord Heinz was the commander, he used to plunge into enemy lines alone. His subordinates would often reprimand him when he was near death’s door.”

“Lord Giaster did?” Johan’s description differed much from the calm, elderly gentleman I’d come to know.

“Yes. He was a hot-blooded young man back in the day.” Johan nodded lightly

as he watched the funeral procession. “He hated paperwork and there was always a mountain of incomplete documents in his office. He’d drink every night at bars and he eventually accumulated an enormous running tab. If I had witnessed his demeanor back then, I doubt I could’ve imagined that he’d become the exemplary lord I know him as today.”

I was thrown off by this new discovery, but I managed to wring out a few words. “He was certainly striking in everything he did.”

Johan looked at me, his eyes soft and filled with serenity. “Lord Heinz developed leadership and fostered trust over many years.”

At that moment, Johan’s words from earlier—his gentle admonition of my lazy mindset—struck me. *No one can do everything with perfection from the beginning. We all grow and learn from our past failures and mistakes.*

“Nacht, don’t feel rushed. Walk at your own pace and you’ll do fine. You have a reliable father and brother as well as citizens who adore you.” Johan spoke to me like an older brother consoling his doleful younger brother.

Rather than lashing out and telling him not to treat me like a child, I only grew lonelier. It would peeve me to admit it, so I would never tell him, but...I had spent many years with Johan by my side, and losing him was going to be painful. Due to my status as a prince and because of my warped personality (which had even earned me the nickname “Prince Grouchy”) I had never made any friends.

*My first friend is also warped, albeit in a different way than I, but his knowledge is vast and I enjoy communing with him. If it were possible, I’d have him remain by my side to support me. However, that is a desire too large to ever bear fruit.*

“You are correct. I’ll start by doing what I can do. I’ll endeavor to never become an unreliable ally, lest Nevel discard us.”

“Yes. I look forward to it.” Johan smiled and purposefully put on an overly self-important air.

*Before long, I will succeed the throne, and so will Nevel’s first prince, His Highness Christoph. As the crown prince’s younger brother, Johan will be his*

*right-hand man—in all likelihood, Johan’s talents in diplomacy will be demonstrated in other countries too. Even if we’re not enemies, he’ll still be quite the nuisance.* Though I knew his presence would be a bother, at the same time, I looked forward to dealing with him in the future.

“Next time we meet, I do hope you’ll be independent of your older sister,” I joked.

Johan had been composed up until now, but his beautiful visage scrunched up. “Mind your own business.”

This man could do anything, but unfortunately, it looked like the day his only weakness disappeared was still far off. But that in itself was very much like Johan. I smiled and gazed up at the sky—sunlight was beginning to shine through gaps in the gloomy clouds.

# The First Prince's Amazement

On a certain day during a certain month, an unprecedented experiment was about to take place in one of the castle rooms—summoning a denizen from another world. It was unrealistic, and if I spoke those words with sobriety, my sanity would be questioned. However, at this moment, we were about to make such a fantastical feat a reality.

There was not a single piece of furniture inside this spacious room. No windows lined the four walls, and the only entrance into the space was the set of double doors behind me. The marble floor was covered by a large, intricate diagram of circles and lines, and the gaps between the lines were densely filled with writing.

This was the so-called magic circle.

Head Sorceress Altman and her two disciples were scrupulously verifying the magic circle's structure. One hour had already passed since I'd entered the room, but I did not urge them to hurry their final review. The king was of the same opinion—he'd been watching in silence next to me this whole time.

If there was a single mistake, the magic had potential to misfire...and only having one mishap was the best-case scenario. There was also a possibility that the magical power used to activate the circle would run wild and cause harm.

The magic circle used for the summoning was, of course, a completely new venture into the unknown. Normal magic circles were formulated using one, or perhaps even two, types of magic. As a layman in the field, I was not well versed in magical theory, but I understood that with each additional type of magic added to a circle, the difficulty of achieving success increased exponentially.

With that information in mind, the magic circle I was currently observing was... Well, it was an amalgamation of various functions and techniques. To name a few, it was supposed to act as a gate to another world, detect and connect to that world, and transfer someone from that world while also protecting the target—everything about this magic circle was atypical. It was



such a complex creation that my apprehensions could not be dispelled even with Irene von Altman, an exceptionally genius sorceress, spearheading the project.

When I learned that my younger sister would not be present for this experiment, I felt relieved from the bottom of my heart. I'd seen her just the other day, and I was well aware that she was no longer a child, but that was a separate matter. I simply wanted to keep her out of harm's way to the best of my abilities.

*One day I will have to yield the duty of protecting her to someone else. Perhaps that day is not far off...but it is not today. I hope I can continue being her overprotective older brother for a while longer.*

I looked up at Leonhart, who was standing nearby. Noticing my gaze upon him, he turned to me.

"Prince Christoph, do you need anything?"

"No, it's nothing." Though I verbally reassured him not to pay heed to me, I couldn't help but scowl at him.

Leonhart was not outraged or confused—he merely put on a strained smile. I had become accustomed to seeing that troubled look of his, with his brows lowered slightly. After all, I often took my anger out on Leonhart because I was not particularly exhilarated that the distance between him and my beloved Rose was shrinking.

*I know I'm acting immature and it's deplorable, but I'm having a hard time controlling myself. Since I was raised as the crown prince, I'm quite confident in my ability to shut out my emotions, but who would've thought I'd be facing such distress this late in my upbringing?*

I was absorbed in my own thoughts, but I was soon brought back to reality by an exasperated voice. "Enough of that. It's about time you detach yourself from your sister," said the king, who'd been reticent until now. He glanced at me without bothering to hide the annoyance in his eyes.

"Our conversation does not pertain to you," I replied, warning him not to meddle.

“It certainly does not pertain to me,” the king readily agreed. However, the fact that he backed down so easily made me even more suspicious...and rightly so. “But,” he continued, “it would be prudent to cease your foolish behavior before *it* finds out and decides to distance itself from you.”

That was an unexpected counterargument; I had no retort to throw back. He’d hit me where it hurt. I wanted to curse at him and tell him to quit it with the unusual fatherly act, but I knew it would only sound like the whining of a defeated dog. In the end, I held my tongue.

I relaxed my pursed lips and exhaled, stifling my irritation. *The one in the wrong right now is not the king or Leonhart. It’s me. I’m snapping at those around me because of my childish possessiveness. Feeling a little lonely is not an appropriate reason to lose my temper.*

Once I’d calmed myself, I turned to the guard captain. “Leonhart.”

“Yes, Your Highness?”

“I’m sorry.” I was embarrassed, but I didn’t let myself avert my gaze. I properly looked him in the eyes and apologized.

A faint smile formed on Leonhart’s lips. “Understood.”

I felt that I’d been defeated by Leonhart, who did not voice a single complaint. *It’s frustrating...but I’m glad my dearest sister chose him.*

As our brief conversation wrapped up, the final check on the magic circle was also completed. Altman came to stand before the king.

“Your Majesty. We have finished our preparations.”

I straightened myself. The air had instantly become tense.

However, the king disregarded this tension and impassively opened his mouth, almost as if it were just another peaceful day. When he gave the command, his tone was as indifferent and bored as ever. “Very well. Then activate the circle.”

“Understood,” replied Altman.

Lutz Eilenberg and Teo Eilenberg took their positions around the circle. The two disciples were without the chokers they usually wore to restrict their

magical powers. Not a sound could be heard from outside the room—only Altman’s steps echoed from the walls as she walked back to the circle. The oppressive silence lasted for fewer than thirty seconds, but the suspense made it feel significantly longer.

I heard someone breathe in. The next moment, the air around the room started to change.

Mysterious noises began pouring from Altman’s lips. They sounded like verses of an ancient language or the music of a country in a far-off land. It felt like I knew those words, but at the same time, they were unknown to me—I had never encountered anything similar in my entire life.

As Altman chanted her spell, the color of her disciples’ eyes gradually changed. Lutz’s shifted from indigo to silver and Teo’s from red to gold. I knew it was a phenomenon that occurred when sorcerers used magic, but seeing it in person was still surprising.

*What a vivid transformation*, I murmured internally. A dim light shone from the sorcerers’ hands and poured into the magic circle. No, an ordinary person like me could not possibly see the flow of magical power. It only *seemed* like the energy was visible to the naked eye because the magic circle had begun to glow—light radiated from the circumference inward as if colored fluid were being poured into it.

Together with Altman’s resplendent chanting, a bluish-white light began to spread to the characters, shapes, and lines drawn in the magic circle. The light shone brighter and brighter, steadily filling up the circle completely. It was such a magnificent and unrealistic spectacle that I forgot to breathe.

Altman’s chanting was steady, but it grew more powerful with each syllable. The air began to tremble, seemingly reacting to her voice, and goose bumps crawled up my skin. The door behind me clattered and creaked noisily. There were no windows, but wind was blowing, causing the sorcerers’ robes to flap up and down.

Beads of sweat dripped from the two disciples’ foreheads and dripped to the floor. Their task clearly required intense concentration. Their eyes were downcast and their brows were creased with deep wrinkles.

Altman continued to chant and the light overflowing from the magic circle slowly changed color. Blue to red, red to white. Hot air rose, flickering and swaying as if it were a blazing conflagration. Then, countless little lights floated up and danced in the air like fireflies fueled by the heat. Finally, they gathered in the center of the circle and formed one large glowing mass.

It looked like a large egg—no, a large cocoon of light. When the effulgence grew to about the size of a person, a stiff snap resounded throughout the room. A crack appeared on the cocoon and even brighter luminescence leaked out from within.

I wasn't sure if that was a good or bad sign for our success. As I watched the cracks grow larger and larger, more and more light spilled out. And then, with a cacophonous pop, the cocoon burst open with blinding radiance.

A muffled, surprised grunt escaped from me and I inadvertently shut my eyes against the sudden bright flash. I thought a shadow had fallen over the room for a moment, but then I was assailed by a strong gust of wind. When all of this passed, I gingerly opened my eyes and lowered the hand I'd unknowingly brought up to shade my face.

The first thing that I saw was a broad back and Leonhart's familiar black uniform. In order to protect me, he'd apparently placed himself between me and the circle. And judging from the disheveled state of his usually well-groomed black hair, if he hadn't shielded me from the brunt of the gale, then the impact would have been much worse.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"No, I'm fine. Thank you."

Next, my eyes fixed on the king next to me. He stood there, looking exactly the same as before the summoning had begun. His hair was barely disheveled, and his expression was as deadpan as always. But his pale-blue eyes were, almost imperceptibly, wider.

"It was a success," he stated simply.

I didn't comprehend his words immediately, but I followed the king's gaze and looked back to the magic circle. When I peered past Altman, I saw that

something was floating in the middle of the circle.

Swathed in light was a girl—she had soft hair, white skin, and downturned eyes embellished with long eyelashes. Her hands were delicate, and her slender legs stretched out from under her skirt. She floated gently down from midair, and the moment her toes touched the ground, the warm light that had enveloped her disappeared.

“Thank you for your service,” the king said to the sorcerers in a low voice.

The girl’s eyes opened in response. They were bright hazel and dazed, lacking focus. *She’s likely still unaware of the current situation...not that this is a situation that’s easy to understand.*

Nevel had summoned a petite girl who looked about the same age as my little sister.

All of us watched her in silence, our gazes keen, and little by little, the glint in the girl’s eyes returned. After sluggishly looking around the room, she batted her long eyelashes blankly.

Then, she repeated her actions over and over. The first time she swept the room was probably an unconscious attempt to understand her situation. The second was because she could not believe her eyes and so she glanced around again to double-check. The third time she scanned her vicinity, her countenance was hopeful that this was all just a dream.

From her wide-open eyes, anyone could understand that she was extremely shocked and confused.

“Uh...what? Huh...?” Meaningless noises streamed out of her in a girlish, high-pitched voice.



“H-Huh? Where am I...? Is this a dream? Um, wow, this is a veeery realistic dream, huh?” She pinched herself lightly with her slim fingers. “Ow,” she uttered in a silly voice.

My heart ached. Her mannerisms appeared more childish than my sister’s...more childish than Rose’s...and guilt welled up inside of me. *How can we possibly force such a young child to bear a heavy burden that we ourselves could not?*

I was shaken to the core and stood there unmoving, but the king stepped forward. He walked past Altman, and when he was right in front of the young girl, whose eyes were restlessly darting around the room, he opened his mouth to address her. “Guest from another world.”

“Eek!” she squeaked out. Eyes wide, she took a long hard look at the king. “Oof, my eyes are prickling...” The girl squinted as if she were staring at a bright light.

However, the king disregarded the girl’s comments and continued speaking, his tone even. “I’m sure you’re perturbed about many things—of course, I will fully explain the situation at hand. But before all else, I wish to apologize for impertinently summoning you here at our own discretion without your permission. I am deeply sorry.”

It took me a few seconds to process that he had just...apologized. His face was still as deadpan as ever, so his apology might have seemed arrogant to some, but *that* king had *apologized*. I was absolutely shocked.

Taken aback by the unsolicited apology, the girl adopted a troubled expression and mumbled, “Ummm, errr, well, I’m not really sure what’s going on here...”

“Rightly so. I am merely apologizing for my own self-satisfaction. There is no need to accept it or forgive me.”

“O-Okay...?” The girl only became more bewildered when faced with the king’s emotionless demeanor. Part of it was likely because his so-called “apology” was a far cry from what the girl was used to.

Generally speaking, when someone was apologized to, they usually had two

simple options: forgive or not forgive. But the king himself had implied that neither was necessary. If that was so, then what was the purpose of his apology?

*Unlike a normal person, the king would not apologize in order to assuage his guilt or for his own self-satisfaction. I surmise that he must have said that to clearly delineate between victim and perpetrator in this situation. Or maybe it's just a tool of his—if he forces her to choose an option that's detrimental to her well-being, she may consider options other than complying with his demands. I doubt he apologized out of a guilty conscience or the goodness of his heart. Perhaps he has some other ulterior motive?*

“Let us change locations. I will explain everything there.” The king immediately turned around to lead the way.

Altman gently supported the befuddled girl from behind with her hand. “This way, please.”

The girl did not resist and timidly followed along.

Most of us moved to a more adequate reception space. This included the king and the girl, me and Altman, and then of course, our guard, Leonhart. Lutz Eilenberg and Teo Eilenberg appeared considerably drained after the summoning, so they stayed behind to rest.

The girl restlessly surveyed her surroundings once she was brought to the parlor room. She looked terribly uncomfortable sitting in the corner of an upholstered sofa. When she inspected our faces in turn, she squinted once again, almost like she was staring at something dazzling. She quietly muttered something to herself, but I couldn't make out her words very well. I heard something that sounded like “hotness scale” but that meant little to me.

“First, I'll start by explaining where you are,” the king began. The girl leaned forward and nodded. It was indubitably what she wanted to know the most. “This is not the world that you live in.”

The girl breathed in sharply.

“You are currently in the Kingdom of Nevel. I am Randolph von Velfalt, the king



of this nation. Using my subordinate, I have called you here with summoning magic for a certain objective.”

The girl held her hand out, halting the king’s explanation. “H-Hold on, wait a second! Summoning? Magic? This isn’t a light novel or a manga!”

There was no one around who would rebuke her for disrespectfully interrupting the king. In fact, the king himself didn’t appear offended—his expression remained as placid as always.

“I do not know what this ‘manga’ is, but I speak only the truth,” he replied flatly.

The girl was at a loss for words.

“There are few who can use magic, but it does indeed exist. Isn’t your presence here more than enough proof of that?”

“Well, that’s...”

“It matters not if you believe me immediately. Make your decision after you’ve listened to my request in whole.”

The girl fell silent for a moment and then finally gave a slight nod.

Her name was Fuzuki Kanon. But her family name was Fuzuki and her given name was Kanon. In her homeland, family names were listed first. She was fifteen years old. She’d been on her way home from a learning institute called a “girls’ high” and had been summoned while she’d been waiting for her friend. Her strange attire was apparently the uniform of her learning institute.

After Fuzuki finished her introduction, the king gave a succinct explanation as to why we had summoned her. He explained how the demon lord was a threat to the peace of this world. And, though currently a seal locked away the demon lord, we expected it to break eventually. Finally, he elucidated how it was highly possible that Fuzuki could completely eradicate the demon lord.

The king left out any superfluous details, and as Fuzuki listened, her pallor grew worse and worse. Cold sweat pricked across her skin as she sat there, and her silence was finally broken when the king uttered the words “power to completely eradicate the demon lord.”

Unable to bear it anymore, she shouted, “No way! Absolutely not! That’s impossible! I’m just an average girl, one you could find anywhere!” She shook her head so vigorously that I worried she might hurt her neck. “Please ask, oh I dunno, someone amazing like a hero or a saint! That’s way too much responsibility for an ordinary high school girl.”

Fuzuki’s reaction was quite natural—a young girl used to living a tranquil life couldn’t possibly bear the burden of defeating a demon lord or bringing world peace.

“Hmm,” mused the king as he listened. He nodded thoughtfully. “So your world has heroes and saints?”

“Huh? W-Well, no. I don’t think we do... Probably not?” Fuzuki was caught off guard by the unexpected question, but she answered honestly.

“Then when and where do they appear?”

“Ummm...” Fuzuki looked up as she searched through her memory. “In light novels and manga...they usually get summoned to another...world...” Her voice grew softer with each word until finally, it disappeared. She’d apparently realized that she had just dug her own grave.

“I see. They sound just like you.” The king’s tone sounded artificial.

“W-Well, maybe that’s true...but I don’t have any special powers...”

“Did the ones summoned in the stories you describe have powers in their previous world?”

Fuzuki sank into silence. However, unable to bear the king’s gaze, she eventually averted her eyes and spoke. “Probably...not. Usually when they’re summoned, they get an incredible power from a goddess...”

*You didn’t need to be honest to a fault.* Her awkward demeanor resembled my precious younger sister’s so much that I wanted to cover my face. *I can’t watch this... She’s too pitiable.*

After her admission, the king mercilessly finished her off with cold, sound logic. “Then that means, as someone who was summoned to another world, you may have gained your own incredible power.”

She froze for around thirty seconds.

*He's acting gentler than he usually would, but the crucial parts are still the same. Even against children who are assiduously trying to search for a way out, he still ruthlessly cuts off all paths of retreat. The king is, in the end, still the king.*

Fuzuki had assumed that it would be acceptable if she refused the king's request, so she had not expected to be coerced into doing anything. That underlying fact was still true—the decision was hers to make. But at the same time, the easiest option had also been concealed from her.

She could have returned home without any lingering feelings of guilt if she had only said, *"I won't listen to any explanation, so send me home now."* But because she'd decided to half-heartedly listen to our plight, she could no longer pretend that she didn't know anything. And because she was not being threatened but merely asked to help, she had likely forgotten that she was the victim here.

"So, what if I don't have any special powers?" Fuzuki asked timidly.

Without hesitation, the king replied, "Naturally, we'd send you back to your world without delay."

She let out a sigh of relief. Her defenseless face was like that of a lost child who'd just glimpsed a way home. It pricked my conscience. The conditions for her return home had shifted from merely listening to the king's request—she now had to demonstrate that she didn't possess any special abilities. It was a disadvantageous change, but she hadn't even detected that shift occurring.

*I thought Rose was too honest and poor at reading between the lines...but even she would notice such a simple trap. Fuzuki is so focused on whether she can return home or not that she's lost sight of everything else. She has no idea that the road home presented to her is a carefully paved detour.*

"Can I assume that you do not mind us testing whether you have powers or not?" the king asked.

Fuzuki hesitated for a moment, but then she nodded. "As long as it's *just* a test."

The king let out a small sigh. “I appreciate your cooperation.” His expression was impassive as usual, but it looked more like an evil smirk right now.

“You’ll send me home if I can’t do it, right?” Fuzuki pushed. “You promise one hundred percent, right?”

“Yes, undoubtedly. I promise,” the king agreed generously.

We had no reason to detain Fuzuki in our world against her will if it turned out she didn’t have any powers to deal with the demon lord. However, Fuzuki had not grasped even a shred of our intentions—she just smiled vapidly. In my mind, I conjured the imagery of a little rabbit caught in a trap, vacantly staring up at me... I felt terribly abhorrent. But, I had no intention of warning her that she’d been tricked. In the end, I was one of the perpetrators of her misfortune.

Fuzuki clenched her fist with fervor. “All righty! Let’s get to it then! Where is the demon lord being sealed?”

The king took out a small box and placed it on top of the table. It was a deep-indigo-colored container, cube-shaped with silver edges and small enough to fit on the palm of one’s hand. It was a plain little box, but it looked sturdy. He undid the clasp and opened it, revealing a stone about the size of a fist. This stone was wrapped in a cloth that served to soften any impact in case the box was treated roughly.

Fuzuki stared at it. Then, eyes wide, she gawked back and forth between the king and the stone repeatedly. “Uh... It’s this thing...?” She pointed at the little stone, baffled.

I’d reacted similarly when I had first laid eyes on the thing—it looked like a regular stone from every angle. There was nothing special about it, nothing worth mentioning. But the king nodded with utmost solemnity.

“Huh? But, this is just a...” Fuzuki stopped herself there, realizing the gravity of the king’s expression.

*“This is just a stone,”* was probably what she was thinking, but she’d found it difficult to muster up the courage to argue when no one else had voiced an objection.

Fuzuki looked dubious, but she dropped the topic of whether the stone was

authentic or not. “Okay. Does anything happen when you touch it?”

“As you can see, it’s fine to touch,” the king replied, lifting the stone with his own hand and holding it out to her.

Fuzuki tentatively reached out. She gently prodded it with her finger as if she were checking how hot it was. After a few pokes, she seemed satisfied, and she took the stone into her own hands.

“I just have to break this, right? Ready aaand...”

The moment Fuzuki raised the stone up in the air, everyone—except for the king—braced themselves. We all knew she was about to slam the stone on the floor. However, the king calmly shook his head.

“No. If you just break it, it’s highly probable that the demon lord will revive.”

“Eep!” Fuzuki paled. She tried to clutch the stone tightly, but in her panic, she fumbled numerous times and almost dropped it.

*Just watching this girl makes my stomach hurt.*

“Th-Then what am I supposed to do...?”

“Use your power to purify or eradicate the evil sealed within that stone.”

“And concretely, that means...?”

“There’s no precedent, so the method is unknown. Why don’t you try concentrating your energy into it first?”

“Concentrate my energy...” Fuzuki parroted and patted the stone.

She then tried rubbing it with both hands, gripping it tightly—all of her efforts were physically focused. After a short time spent on trial and error, she stopped moving her hands and looked up.

Her brows looked like an upside-down V. “I’m really not feeling like this is possible for me...” she said in a weak voice.

After brooding for a moment, the king turned. “Altman,” he called. “How does one channel their magic?”

“The nature of her magic is likely different from what I am familiar with, so I may instill unwanted habits in her. Is that acceptable?” Altman replied.

“Do it. We’ll make little progress if we don’t use whatever leads we have, even if we squander all the time in the world.”

“Understood.”

Altman faced Fuzuki and carefully instructed her. “Magical power is circulated throughout your body from your heart, just like your blood. Concentrate that feeling into your fingers.”

Fuzuki closed her eyes and followed Altman’s directions. I could see from her expression that an image had come to mind. Fuzuki was an honest one and did her best to follow the instructions. I wordlessly watched, but I didn’t see any striking changes in her or the stone’s appearance.

Silence fell upon the room. After more than ten minutes of concentrating, Fuzuki finally opened her eyes. She let out a large breath of air as if she had just surfaced from diving underwater.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think this is ever gonna work.” Fuzuki looked apologetic and simultaneously relieved. In all likelihood, she honestly felt both emotions.

She placed the stone back on its shock-absorbing cloth. Just as she was about to move away, she stopped, suddenly noticing something. “Huh? What’s this?” Fuzuki dusted off something from her hand, something that looked like powder. Gray dustlike particles drifted onto the white fabric. “Oops, I’m sorry. I got the cloth dirty.”

Flustered, Fuzuki moved to brush the little particles onto the floor.

“Wait.” The king stopped her in her tracks with a single word. “Altman, inspect it.”

“Yes, sir.” Altman approached Fuzuki. “May I?” she asked before gently taking Fuzuki’s hands in her own. She meticulously moved the powder from Fuzuki’s hands onto the cloth and then examined it. Altman compared the particles to the stone and then after another examination in her hand, she turned to the king.

“I suspect that part of the stone deteriorated and turned into these sandy granules.”

“As I thought,” muttered the king.

“Huh? B-But it was shiny on the outside when I was holding it.”

“Yes. This is proof of your power,” explained the king.

Fuzuki’s gaze dropped to her hands. “My power?” She unclenched her hands and stared at them as if she were trying to discern some unseen magic in them.

“It seems like it’ll take some time, but your powers look to be effective. Won’t you lend us your strength?”

“Um... I really want to help you, but my papa and mama will worry if I don’t get home soon.”

“Altman. Is it possible to return her to the same time as when she was summoned?”

“Right now, Lady Fuzuki is temporarily severed from her world, so we can return her in the same juncture and in the same condition. When we send her home, we will be sure to put her in the same time and place as to not cause any distortions in her world.”

“B-But, um, but I can’t fight! Won’t I drag you all down?”

“There is no need for you to fight anyone. We will assign our nation’s best knight as your personal guard so that you will be returned to your parents without a single scratch.”

Fuzuki looked like she was grasping for an escape, but every excuse she came up with was promptly crushed. Unable to think of any more reasons to leave, Fuzuki hung her head.

A man stepped forward and knelt in front of the young girl. His elegant movements attracted her gaze.

“I am Leonhart von Orsein,” he said, introducing himself briefly.

The girl’s blanched face was instantly dyed crimson.

# The Reincarnated Princess's Melancholy

Apparently, the shrine maiden had finally been summoned. Why the dubious wording? Because I hadn't met her, not even once.

Perhaps due to my efforts to break event flags, the shrine maiden had appeared a year sooner than in *Hidden World's* plot. In our current timeline, the demon lord hadn't even been revived, so maybe that year was a paltry difference. More importantly, there was a larger problem at hand—the shrine maiden's personal guard was none other than Sir Leonhart!

A lot of things had changed from the game's original setting, so I'd predicted that plenty of irregularities would follow. I'd thought it was a bit strange that, on the day of the summoning ceremony, Klaus had been stuck to my side as usual. That day, I'd thought, *Won't it be too late for him to escort the shrine maiden after she's summoned?*

It never occurred to me that Sir Leonhart would become her guard instead! But after some reevaluation...perhaps it was meant to happen. The shrine maiden was a person of significant importance to our country, and she was a precious guest from another world. She needed to be protected with the utmost care. Plus, we had selfishly brought her to our world and foisted a heavy burden upon her. Frankly, we needed her cooperation.

There was also the issue of Lapter. Since they desired to revive the demon lord, the shrine maiden would be a high-priority target for their assassins—selecting Sir Leonhart to be her personal guard was an appropriate decision under those circumstances. In *Hidden World*, Klaus was probably chosen because Nevel's geopolitical climate was tumultuous; there was a war accompanied by the revival of the demon lord, so as a commanding officer, Sir Leonhart couldn't be away from the strife for long periods of time. In present Nevel, things were much calmer, so he had the opportunity to guard her.

A large sigh escaped from my lips. *I understand why this happened...but that doesn't make me feel any better. Of course I'm down in the dumps. I mean,*



*come on, the shrine maiden is super adorable. Her appearance is cute, but her personality is even cuter! Though she's a natural airhead and a bit of a klutz, she's also a bright girl who tries her best. I'm not strong enough to remain composed when the person I love is going to be next to such a lovable girl every single day. My only solace is that Sir Leonhart isn't one of the suitor characters.*

"Lady Mary?"

"Huh?"

I was lost in deep thought, but someone calling out to me brought me back to my senses.

"Is something the matter?" George asked, sounding slightly worried. "You look pale. Why don't you rest?" Sitting next to George was Lord Julius, who was regarding me with similar concern in his eyes.

I smiled and shook my head. "I'm fine. My mind merely wandered off for a moment... I'm sorry."

*Come on, now isn't the time for brooding. George and Lord Julius were kind enough to visit the castle and help me relax while I'm on lockdown. They came all the way here, so I can't keep moping around. Snap out of it!*

"No. We came uninvited, so the apology is ours," Lord Julius said. "We wanted to see you since it's been too long, but we shouldn't have pushed you so hard."

He sounded like he was readying to leave, so I quickly replied, "You're not pushing me at all! I've been shut inside too much as of late, so I'm overjoyed that you've come to visit me."

I hadn't seen them for what felt like forever, so I truly was happy. I was also grateful that they'd given me an excuse to enjoy some fresh air in the castle garden's gazebo. Staying indoors was important for my own safety, but being shut in my room all the time had started to make me depressed.

Though Lord Julius and George still looked worried, they accepted my heartfelt explanation.

"If you feel even the slightest bit unwell, please tell us," George insisted.

I nodded with a smile. "Of course."

George used to be lovely like a young girl, but now he'd matured into a fine, virile young man. Beneath the gentle curve of his eyebrows were violet eyes adorned by long eyelashes, and his gaze housed an intellectual gleam. Though his visage still shared similarities with his mother, Emma, his cheeks had lost their fat, and the androgynous air surrounding him had vanished. He had become the perfect, charming nobleman that young noblewomen dreamed of.

*He's still the same worrywart as always though,* I thought with a small smile. Emma was now in good health, but sometimes when she overslept, George would fret and write "*I wonder if she's not feeling well?*" in his letters to me. *Rather than developing a mother complex, he's become a splendid son who loves his mother.*

"I don't know if it will suffice to amuse you, but I've brought a few rare books that might help stave off your boredom. You should receive them later." Lord Julius's expression softened gently—his countenance had remained as handsome as ever throughout the years.

*I believe he's over thirty years old now, but he looks just as young as when I first met him. And, he appears even more youthful when he smiles, so anyone would think he's in his early twenties. However, his demeanor is composed and dignified, as befitting his age. I'm always a bit dazzled by the contrast.*

"Thank you very much. Lord Julius, the books you bring are always so intriguing. I can't wait to read them."

"I find your ideas much more intriguing."

"My ideas?" I tilted my head questioningly, unsure of what he was referring to.

Lord Julius stared at me with glittering eyes. "Indeed. I heard that a large medical facility is going to be constructed."

I looked at him in surprise.

"Rumor has it...that it was *your* proposal."

I almost did a spit take, but I barely managed to hold it down. *The university*

*hospital project is well on its way; however, the idea left my hands long ago. Sure, I suggested it, but I just threw out a rough outline of what I was imagining. You can't even call what I blathered about a proper draft proposal.*

*And, hold on... Did he just say there are rumors about me? When my father has his hands in a project, it's usually kept pretty quiet, so I doubt information would be so easily divulged. Which means...either the info was intentionally disclosed, or father didn't think it mattered if rumors emerged.*

*My father's smug face floated through my mind, and I imagined him saying, "You came up with this plan, so take responsibility until the end."*

*Maybe not... I'm probably just being too self-conscious or paranoid. Regardless, it's not good for my mental health or stomach to dwell on things, so let's try not to think about it too hard.*

*"I was surprised when I heard the hospital would also operate as a learning institution. It's such an ambitious, dreamlike project," Lord Julius gushed. "People were skeptical when they first heard about it, but now that it's starting to come alive, everyone is in a state of high anticipation for its completion."*

*He paused a moment, then gave a little chuckle. "You can count me among those excited. After all, it's not only medical professionals who are interested—merchants, scholars, and people from all walks of life are keeping a keen eye on this project. I know firsthand that Nevel's citizens are coming to life at the prospect."*

*I see. When a hospital is erected, it's not only doctors and pharmacists who are involved but professionals from all kinds of fields. I wasn't thinking that far ahead when I proposed it to father, but I'm pleased it's gone down a positive path.*

*"You have a truly discerning eye for these sorts of things," Lord Julius said, giving me a smile.*

*I shook my head frantically. "No, not at all."*

*"Always the humble one."*

*You're wrong. I really didn't do anything. Being praised for an idea I just threw out on a whim makes me want to flee in shame rather than feel thrilled.*

“I did nothing of importance,” I denied, breaking out in a cold sweat. “The project’s success will be by virtue of all the people who are working hard to realize the vision.”

George beamed at me. “You certainly never change, Lady Mary.”

*He definitely thinks I’m being humble. I’m really not trying to be! I’ve contributed absolutely nothing!*

“The word on the street is that the medical facility will be named after you,” Lord Julius informed me.

I almost fainted with a smile pasted on my face. *I must prevent that...even if I have to negotiate with father myself*, I swore.

As we chatted about the hospital and medicine, the conversation turned toward the castle greenhouse. Lord Julius was interested in seeing it, so I offered to show him around—which was how we ended up making our way there.

“To think I’d be able to enter the castle greenhouse... It’s like a dream!” Lord Julius exclaimed, his eyes narrowed ecstatically. He adored rarities, so this reaction was very fitting for him.

I smiled wryly. “I do not know if it will meet your expectations, but it is one of the places I love very much. I’d be delighted if it suited your fancy.”

“I’m extremely honored that you’re showing me a place you hold in such high regard, Lady Mary.”

This handsome man had been shooting a radiant smile in all directions the whole time we’d been walking. *Lord Julius, the maids giving way to us are going to fall in love with you. I wish you’d be more self-aware.* The flustered women in the corridor waited for us to pass by, heads bowed and faces red up to their ears. *I’m sorry... I’ll tuck this sinful man away in the greenhouse soon, so please, do your best to work hard.*

After a while, George finally spoke up. “Uncle,” he began. He grimaced at Lord Julius, who was blissfully grinning from ear to ear.

*What’s aggravating George so much that deep wrinkles are creasing his*

brow?

“You’re not a child. Please compose yourself.”

George’s cold bluntness had a different sort of charm than Lord Julius’s. The contrast between his stunning good looks and his frigid gaze shot through the hearts of another group of maids. *Looks like there’s demand for both a kind gentleman and a coolheaded nobleman. Yeah, I totally get it. Though the only option for me is a manly knight...*

George had snapped out a sentiment loaded with disapproval, but Lord Julius merely opened his eyes wide and replied, “Your words have such a bite to them... Could it be? Are you jealous?”

A beat later, George’s skin instantly flushed red. “What?!”

*I believe there’s also a high demand for blushing, beautiful young men.* Unfortunately, my theory could not be confirmed since we’d already walked far away from all the maids. The only ones who witnessed George’s bright red visage were me, Lord Julius, and my guard, Klaus.

“Oh? Looks like I hit the nail on the head,” Lord Julius teased.

“That’s an absurd notion!”

“It’d be best if you were more like me—just say what’s on your mind.” Lord Julius looked amused as he patted his nephew’s head.

Irritated, George smacked his uncle’s hand away. I watched their endearing exchange with a faint grin. Klaus also regarded them with a similar smile. *Actually... No, of course he’s not really smiling. His expression is as void of feeling as a Tibetan fox’s. I wish he’d be a little more amicable sometimes.*

“Um, Lady Mary!”

“Huh? Oh, yes?”

I was so distracted by Klaus that I didn’t notice George calling for my attention. I snapped back to reality and looked up at him. His fair skin was flushed slightly pink.

“I, erm... I’m also elated that you’re guiding us around the greenhouse.” Abashed, George cast his eyes down. His long lashes fluttered gently.

*Hold on! I'm the girl here, but he's way sexier than I. What the heck? And I don't really get what he's trying to say...*

"Lord George, if I remember correctly, haven't you visited the greenhouse before?" I asked, tilting my head quizzically to the side.

*The last time he came to the castle, Lutz and Teo showed him around the greenhouse.*

George looked at me, dumbfounded. "That's not... Well, yes, that's right. I received a tour when I came here in the past."

*Ah, crap. He was just offering me lip service, but I delved too deep into the subject. Stupid me! He went ahead and restated what Lord Julius said, so I thought it had some deeper meaning. Turns out, he also meant something along the lines of feeling honored.*

Uncertain of what to do, I looked to Lord Julius for help. He was clutching his stomach and laughing behind George's back. *Hmm? I feel like I saw something similar a long time ago... Is this déjà vu?*

"My nephew is as sloppy as always," he remarked, almost sounding disappointed.

George turned the other way.

"And you left out the most important part," he continued, "so of course she'd react like that."

"I-I know that already!" George stammered.

*The most important part? Which would be...what, exactly? It's hard to join in the conversation if I don't understand the key points.*

I let the two banter and my gaze wandered away from them. I glanced out the window. Through the glass, I spotted a familiar figure in the garden.

It was a tall and lean man that I'd recognize even from a mile away. He looked dashing in his royal guard uniform—I wouldn't mistake him, even from behind. *Sir Leonhart!* Just calling out his name in my heart made my chest heat up. I hadn't seen the man I loved in a few long weeks, so I was glad to catch a glimpse of him...even if it was just a passing glance of his back from afar.

He hadn't noticed me, which was a good thing. Like this, I could enjoy my fill of Sir Leonhart's wonderful countenance, and I was flooded with jubilation just gazing at his broad back.

However, my brief moment of happiness quickly faded away.

I spotted a petite girl standing by Sir Leonhart's side. She had soft-looking chiffon-beige hair that was styled in a medium, shoulder-length bob. Her large hazel eyes were framed by long eyelashes, and though she was pale overall, her complexion was fair and beautiful. She was petite and slender, but she had full breasts that gave her an enviable figure.

This gorgeous girl looked like she could be not only the main character of an otome game...but also a love interest in a dating sim for men.

She was the shrine maiden and heroine of *Hidden World*...and she was standing next to Sir Leonhart.

*Wow... She's really cute. Isn't she almost too cute? I knew the shrine maiden was going to be a lovely young lady, but she's exceeded my expectations. Seeing the shrine maiden's pulchritude made me feel all the more impatient and uneasy. If Sir Leonhart's always with such a beautiful girl...won't he fall for her?*

I felt a sharp pain in my stomach, and I clutched it with my hand as I continued to watch them. The shrine maiden looked up at Sir Leonhart and began talking to him about something. They spoke to each other, and then suddenly, the shrine maiden broke out into a wide grin.

*N-N-N-N-N-No! Nooo! Stop that! He'll fall in love with you! He's going to become absolutely smitten!* The shrine maiden's charming smile rivaled gorgeous flowers blooming in the spring, and when I saw it, I screamed from the bottom of my heart.

*Are there any men in this world whose hearts wouldn't be moved by a super-duper cute girl beaming at them with a super-duper cute smile?! I hope there are... Please, let there be a man who can resist!* I timidly peered back at Sir Leonhart's face.

Sir Leonhart returned a reserved smile. It was a terribly normal expression, but I felt a small prick in my chest. I had no intention of being someone who

would tell him not to smile at other women, but...the selfish notion had certainly drifted through my mind, causing my heart to ache. That desire itself made me feel ashamed.

*I don't have any right to inhibit any of Sir Leonhart's actions. I know that, but I can't help wishing that I did. Please. Look at me.*

"Sir...Leon." A quiet whisper escaped from my mouth, one so soft that no one could hear—at least, no one should've heard.

However, Sir Leonhart coincidentally turned around in my direction, almost as if he'd sensed my voice. We were separated by the glass window and were quite a distance apart, but I knew our gazes met. Sir Leonhart located my presence, and his eyes widened slightly.

Then, his expression melted.

I let out a tiny gasp in surprise. His eyes, which were normally sharp and focused, softened sweetly. I could read from the way his shapely lips moved and arced that he was mouthing, "*Princess.*" Saying that he looked to be in a good mood was an understatement—he seemed over the moon as he smiled broadly at me.

*How sly. If you look that pleased to see me, then I might get the wrong idea. I'll start hoping that you feel for me even a tenth of how much I desire to be with you.*

Our eyes stayed locked for not even ten full seconds. Sir Leonhart had to leave soon after to accompany the shrine maiden somewhere, but after that fleeting moment, I was in a euphoric mood for the rest of the day.



# The Reincarnated Princess's Proposition

In the end, I wasn't able to give Lord Julius and George a tour of the greenhouse.

*Lord Julius said George wasn't feeling well. I hope he's okay.* George's complexion hadn't looked particularly poor, but he had seemed a bit out of it as Lord Julius guided him home. *I didn't notice he was under the weather and I dragged him around the castle... I'm sorry...*

Klaus had a knowing look on his face as they took their leave, and he kept asserting that I needn't pay heed to what'd happened. However, I couldn't accept that explanation. As I walked to my destination, I decided I'd write an apology letter and inquire about George's health.

"How worthless."

I was in my father's private room. He'd ruthlessly disregarded my request without even looking up from the documents he was reviewing.

"It matters not what the facility is named." His eyes were thin with drowsiness as he apathetically relayed those words to me. It sounded almost like he was sighing. With his chin resting on one hand, he turned a page with his long fingers, whipping up a small breeze that made his bangs flutter slightly.

I felt my mouth twitch, but I raised the corners of my lips into a smile. "If it doesn't matter, then why not change it?" The crux of our conversation (if it could even be called a conversation) was what Lord Julius had mentioned earlier—that the university hospital project might be named after me.

Yeah, that.

I knew my father would brush aside my concern as ludicrous. I'd expected him to scoff and say something along the lines of, *"Why would your name be left for future generations to remember? Don't be conceited."* But my expectations were betrayed, and he hadn't refuted the suggestion.

My father finished scanning the document, picked up his quill, and signed it with impeccable handwriting. Once he'd finished, he moved it to the side and picked up another stack of papers. It was getting late, but he was still as busy as ever, like a true workaholic.

"I said it doesn't matter, so why should I even pay attention to your opinion?" He sneered. "Inconceivable."

I almost snapped at that last remark. *Okay, fine! It's just as you said! Not caring about something doesn't mean you have to take my opinion on the matter! But it pisses me off when you say it to my face like that!* However, I knew that if I spoke back, my spite would only be repaid twofold.

And so, I caged the words inside, and for a while, silence consumed the room. Rhythmic flipping and paper scuffling filled the void between us. He finished signing the new set of documents and then tossed it lightly onto the finished stack of paperwork.

My father put down his quill and sank back into the sofa, sighing. His cold, pale-blue eyes focused on me. "It doesn't matter to me whether the hospital is named after you or the chancellor's granddaughter's cat. But, that does not hold true for the people."

"Are you implying that the people wish for it?" I asked dubiously.

"That is correct," he said firmly. "Our citizens are beginning to regard you as a sacred existence. Conduct yourself in a manner befitting a symbol of our royal bloodline."

"S-Sacred..." Taken aback, I muttered, "I'm far from the real thing."

Exasperation filled his face. "No matter how removed from reality it may be, once a rumor spreads enough, it will become the truth. You have prevented the spread of plague in our nation and in others, and this achievement has not gone unnoticed. On top of that, your believers have been spreading good rumors—and only good rumors—about you here and there. This outcome is only a matter of course."

Sacred? Believers? Too many unfamiliar words were being used to describe the situation around me. I felt dizzy, and my head was starting to ache as well.

A false idol had taken life and left me—the real thing—behind.

“The doctors that you brought here also desire for the facility to be named after you. Why don’t you weigh your petty concerns and shyness against their wishes?”

I only looked on in silence.

He crossed his long legs and then said in a haughty tone, “If you still insist on preventing it, perhaps I’ll consider your concerns.”

I couldn’t utter a single word in response. *It’s vexing...but I’ve lost completely. Now that I know the Khuer tribe wants it, what more is there to consider? They left their homeland and followed me to a nation far away because they believed in me. My shame doesn’t even hold a candle to their wishes.*

*And honestly, people probably don’t even care where the name of a hospital originates. In a year or two, it’ll become just like the name of a plant—just another label. Yeah, let’s believe in that.*

I gave a small nod to show that I understood, and my father snorted. “You came all the way to my room for that?”

“It was an important matter to me.”

“I speculated that this would be about a different issue.”

“A different issue?” I tilted my head to the side.

“Aren’t you dissatisfied with who is guarding our guest?”

*The guest? Oh, he must mean the shrine maiden. He wants to know if I object to Sir Leonhart being assigned as her personal escort.*

“Our guest is a critical figure for our nation, and Sir Leonhart is an outstanding individual. I believe it was an appropriate decision.”

Father leaned on the armrest of the sofa and rested his chin on his hand. He carefully scrutinized my face, staying silent all the while. It seemed like his clear eyes would see right through my facade, and a bitter smile formed on my lips.

“I spoke without factoring in my personal feelings,” I admitted honestly.

“I see” was his simple response. Fed up, his eyes narrowed. “It seems like you

both enjoy being roundabout.”

I looked at him questioningly, unsure what he was trying to get at.

My father opened his mouth once more. “I did entrust our knight captain with our esteemed guest because I deemed it suitable. But *that one* wished to guard her even before I gave the command.”

“Huh?” I sounded terribly uneasy. My mind was in chaos, and I tried to digest my father’s words.

*Does that mean Sir Leonhart volunteered to be the shrine maiden’s guard? He’s not one who is obsessed with elevating his status or gaining glory. Does that mean...Sir Leonhart himself wished to protect the shrine maiden?*

“Cease that dark expression,” my father snapped. “I can guess what nonsense is going through your mind, but it is not what you are assuming.”

My desire to burst into tears had likely shown on my face.

My father peered at my pathetic expression and let out a heavy sigh. “There is something *that one* desires, no matter the cost. He came and petitioned for permission to obtain it.”

The conversation had veered off in a direction I hadn’t expected, and my eyes only grew rounder.

“He came saying that he’d complete any demand, no matter how unreasonable, so I even considered using him to make peace with Lapter. Unfortunately, our country cannot afford to lose that man. As a compromise, I ordered him to protect our guest until she was safely returned home. That is all there is to this matter.”

*I never expected Sir Leonhart to desire something so badly. If he had to petition his request to father...then is it on par with a national treasure? Something that Sir Leonhart wants... Perhaps a sword? But he doesn’t seem to have such worldly desires. Besides, what does he mean by “permission to obtain it?” Is it not something he can simply receive from father? I haven’t a clue as to what it could be, but I wish I could do something to help. If only it were something I could give him as a present.*

“From my end, this all looks like a farce, but both of you are excessively serious to the bitter end,” father uttered wearily, eyes cast down.

## Struggles of a Certain Doctor

I readjusted the luggage in my hands and glanced to the side. “Lily, hanging in there?”

The girl smiled and nodded. “Yes, Wolf.”

In her arms, Lily carried a huge mound of documents. *Where on earth do those skinny arms of hers hide all that strength?* It was a mystery, but her posture remained impeccable. Growing up deep in the mountains had forged her core. She walked briskly and beautifully without faltering.

“When we’ve finished moving all this, let’s take a break,” I suggested.

“If you’re worried about me, I’m not tired yet.”

Her reliable reply made me smile wryly. The children of my tribe were all hard workers. They had always been this way, even when we’d lived in our secluded village. After all, it’d been necessary for survival. But things were different now. They energetically toiled away to reach their goals—it was certainly a dazzling sight. Just seeing the twinkle in their eyes was enough to reinvigorate me. But that fervent enthusiasm did come with a small problem.

My current objective was to remind the children to relax sometimes and not sprint ahead at full speed.

“We received some baked sweets from Mary. Don’t you want to eat them?” I asked with a wink.

Lily instantly took my bait. “I do!”

Mentioning Mary’s name had an immediate effect on her. Sadly enough, the sweets hadn’t been handmade by Mary, but I kept that information to myself. Though Lily would probably realize after taking a single bite, it was a win if I could get her to rest.

Once we reached our destination, I shifted the luggage I was holding to my right side and used my left hand to grab the doorknob. I dexterously opened

the door, and as it swung open, lively chatter from within the room poured out.

“Can’t you listen to your seniors?! You greenhorn!”

“What do you mean *senior*?! Aren’t you the one who prattled on about how a three-year difference was trivial once past sixty?!”

*This again?* The old geezers were immaturely squabbling right before my eyes. I felt a headache coming on.

I’d hoped they would’ve cleaned the room a bit while I was out...but it was still in a disastrous state. The floor was crammed with baggage and a mountain of papers was piled up high on the desk. Rolf was sitting in a corner of the room scribbling away with a brush. The village’s number one brat was diligently working on paperwork as if he couldn’t hear the old geezers quarreling.

Rolf looked up when I dropped off the new luggage next to him.

“Good job,” he said.

“Looks like you’ve been hard at work... Impressive, considering how noisy it is in here.” I glanced at the old men who were causing an uproar.

Rolf scratched his forehead with the butt end of the brush. “I’m used to it already. By the way, they were supposedly in contention over the types of essential oils to mix into salves...but midway through the conversation, they somehow started arguing about how best to capture a woman’s heart.”

“Another topic to not give a crap about,” I spat, heaving a long sigh.

The Khuer method of making medicine had been passed down in our tribe for centuries, so we all shared the same fundamentals. However, the particulars often varied from family to family. Some methods saved time while others were more time-consuming. Sometimes, even the ingredients differed. We were currently compiling the various methods in order to experiment and discuss which were the best. The old men were supposed to be sorting that out with Rolf acting as their helper... But, as reality would have it, the only one seriously working was the youngest boy in the room.

“You’re always fussing over the minor details! That’s why your wife got sick and tired of you!”

“Now when did my wife get sick of me?! Even now, we’re still deeply in love! Don’t project your own jealousy just because your wife leads you around by the nose!”

“Who’s projecting?! I can’t believe you don’t understand the charm of a strong-willed woman... This is why I can’t stand young whippersnappers who are wet behind the ears.”

*This is what happens right after some of the elders arrive. Just imagining what it’ll be like once they’re all here...wears me out.*

Without a doubt, they were all brilliant doctors, but they were too stubborn and strong-minded. The Khuer would have to cooperate with many people from here on out to build a medical facility that would also double as a learning institute. Yet, we were already in a messy situation with just our own folks. At this rate, would things really work out?

“Wolf, may I leave these here?” Lily asked.

“Oh, pardon me. Yes, please.”

I moved the luggage to the side to make space for Lily to put down the documents she was still carrying. Lily set down her stack of papers and then turned to the old men. She approached our elders, who were still meaninglessly bickering, and they finally noticed her presence.

“Elders.”

“What is it, Lily?”

“Oh, Lily. Do you need something?”

They broke into broad smiles when they saw her—both men doted upon Lily like she was a grandchild. They peered at her with warm eyes, and she broke into a beautiful smile. In the past, her expression had hardly ever changed, but that fact almost seemed like a lie now.

“Did you finish working?” she asked them.

The air iced over instantly. The two old men stood frozen solid, smiles still plastered on their faces. Even I stopped moving.

The only one who remained the same was Rolf. “Oh boy,” he muttered in a



fed-up tone before returning his attention to the documents. He grabbed a bundle of papers from the giant mountain and began reviewing their contents.

“Surely you’re not slacking off, right? My elders would never behave in a way that would betray Lady Mary’s faith in us, correct?” Lily was smiling, but at a closer glance, her smile did not reach her eyes.

Chilled to the bone by her gaze, the old men paled.

“Yes... Of...course...not,” they replied, voices stiff and faltering.

Lily’s eyes narrowed in satisfaction.

“Lily... You’ve become strong,” I mumbled quietly to myself.

*Looks like it’ll be best to let Lily manage the elders.* I watched as the two men began to carefully examine the documents, and then I shifted my gaze to Rolf. When I tapped on the desk with the knuckle of my finger, he looked up at me.

“Rolf, let the elders take over the work for a short while,” I said. “Come with us for a break.”

“I’m fine. I’ll take a break on my own once I reach a good stopping point.”

*This one’s assiduous as well.*

“If you push yourself too hard, your efficiency will drop,” I chided.

Rolf smiled with a bratty look. “I’m young, so I’ll be fine.”

I let out a sarcastic laugh and poked his head. “That wouldn’t be a snide remark directed at me, now would it?”

The two old men laughed in response to my comment. “Young Wolf, you’re still a little fledgling in our eyes.”

“Ever since you heard that young lady’s idea, your face has been filled with excitement, just like Rolf and Lily’s.”

“That young lady’s idea” referred to Mary’s proposal to construct a medical facility. I was fully aware that my zeal for the project outdid even the two children’s, so I scowled and retreated into silence. Even if I tried to present myself as displeased, my face was probably too red to persuade anyone of anything.

“Well, it’s not like we can talk,” the old man said.

The corners of their eyes softened with merriment.

“That little lady is an amazing one. She came up with an ideal plan that’s the dream of every single aspiring doctor and pharmacist. And it’s going to be turned into a reality.”

The old men were talking heartily, but their conversation was interrupted by Rolf. “Yeah,” the boy remarked casually, “but there *are* plenty of problems piling up.”

The number of wrinkles on the elders’ already wrinkly faces multiplied, and they roared with laughter. “There ain’t a single Khuer who doesn’t enjoy grappling with difficult problems.”

*I know, right?* I agreed internally. Even though our days had become busy enough to make my eyes spin, not a single person had whined. On the contrary, we all seemed to be greatly enjoying each passing day. After all, the facility of our dreams awaited us at the end of the road.

“In a hundred years, the day will surely come when anyone can study to become a doctor. The hellish days when people could only helplessly watch their families weaken will be over. Everyone will be treated cordially, as if they were royalty, and medicine will be available in all towns at a cheap cost. It’ll become a world where anyone and everyone will live until they’re wrinkly old grandparents.”

For the elders who had survived those very turning points in their lives long ago, it was a naive dream for them to describe. But no one laughed at their hope.

“A hundred years... If I work hard, will I still be alive to see that?” Lily murmured quietly.

I could tell by her serious expression that she was not joking—she’d meant every single word. The maximum life span of the residents of this world was eighty years at best. Living beyond a hundred years was like a dream within a dream. The old me would’ve called it absurd and laughed it off. But now...

“Who knows? It all depends on how much effort we put in.”

Even if it was a preposterous dream, there was still a chance that we could seize hold of it if we reached our hands out. As long as we didn't give up, the possibility would never be zero. And as long as we lived, we would forever be a testimony to that potential. That passionate determination burned within us all.

"Yes, I'll work hard," Lily declared, fists clenched. "Even if I become a wrinkly old lady a hundred years from now, I'll do my utmost to pass down stories of Lady Mary's wondrous deeds."

Her goal seemed to have deviated a bit, but her resolve was still set on a fine outcome.

"Lily, if it's her name you're talking about, I bet it'll be passed down for centuries without you telling younger generations," Rolf said.

"I heard the medical facility will be named after Mary, so she'll get that recognition," I added in agreement.

But Lily shook her head, indicating that we didn't understand her. "I don't want to convey just her name—I want to tell people about her personality and achievements too. Don't you want to brag to crowds of people about how magnificent our master is?"

Lily puffed up with pride as she spoke, causing me to chuckle. *She doesn't just want people to know about Mary—she wants to brag? What adorable arrogance.*

"Then why don't you erect a statue with a plaque in front of the institution?" Rolf threw out an offhand comment without bothering to hide his consternation.

Lily's eyes widened. She stayed still, deep in thought, and then suddenly hit her palm with her fist.

"That's it!"

"Wait, Lily," I said quickly, trying to stop her. "I have a bad feeling about where you're going with this."

"How much does it cost to build a statue? Once I figure that out, I'd better start saving."

“Lily, hold on. Stop it. Ugly will cry,” Rolf objected.

But Lily was no longer listening. She started brainstorming aloud. “Perhaps I could even make them myself. But I have no talent for the arts. I doubt I could reproduce even half of Lady Mary’s beauty... Should I become an apprentice somewhere?”

She was finally heading down the wrong path. We all knew we needed to stop her, so we desperately mustered up all the words and reasons that might dissuade her intentions.

*To our beloved master... I’m terribly sorry if we fail to prevent this...*

# The Reincarnated Princess in an Emergency

That night marked the end of another peaceful day. Perhaps because I'd heard there was something Sir Leonhart coveted, I blithely dreamed of going on a treasure-seeking adventure. My dream self held up a blurry object, and I thought, *I can propose to Sir Leonhart with this!* It was a stupid dream, even for me.

Yet, at that moment, my consciousness abruptly snapped out of my short repose and I was dragged back to reality. This was an unusual occurrence for me—I typically always slept until morning without waking up. Even stranger was the fact that my drowsiness disappeared instantly, leaving me wide awake.

I zoned out at the familiar ceiling and then turned my head to survey the room. Peering through the gap in the curtains, I could tell that it was still pitch-black outside. Not a single beam of moonlight shone through, possibly because the sky was overcast or tonight was a new moon. My eyes soon grew accustomed to the darkness and I could clearly see my surroundings.

In my shadowy room, a small silhouette caught my attention.

“Nero?”

My beloved cat—who I'd thought would be curled up fast asleep in his rattan basket—was wide awake. His ears were pricked up, but when I called his name, they didn't even twitch. It was as if he hadn't heard me. His round pupils were fixed upon the door.

I'd heard it was common for cats to stare at nothing, but for some reason, an indescribable unease welled up inside of me. Draping a thin shawl over my shoulders, I left my bed. I then moved toward Nero, my eyes trained on him.

“What's wrong, Nero? Is...something there?”

Anxiety filled my voice, so much so that it almost didn't sound like my own. My beloved cat, who was usually so expressive, stood unmoving like a statue and didn't respond. The earsplitting silence lingered for a while. Who knows

how long we stayed there?

Suddenly, Nero's ears twitched. And then, not even a moment later, a loud noise rang throughout the castle. The sharp sound of glass shattering pierced through my eardrums. It was followed by the high-pitched scream of a woman.

I reflexively picked up Nero in my arms and gazed in the direction of the noise. I could hear the mixed sounds of loud stomping and people talking, but the commotion was too distant, so I couldn't make out what they were saying. The tumult felt like a reenactment of *that* night; my heart was pounding hard like I'd just finished sprinting at top speed.

I was already well aware that my life was in danger... At least, I should have been. When I'd first heard that assassins were aiming for my life, I had been unbearably fearful, but time had passed peacefully, and I'd become remiss. An abrupt visit by the unexpected was all that was needed to shake my mind.

Suddenly, a quiet knock came at my door. My body locked up in shock and I gave a feeble response.

The knight standing guard outside my room was checking up on me, and as he spoke, his tone was apologetic. "Forgive me for disturbing your slumber. Is everything all right?"

"I'm fine," I replied. "More importantly, I heard a ruckus coming from out there. Did something happen?"

The knight sounded relieved when I relayed through the door that I was safe. No matter what kind of emergency it was, he must've felt hesitant about entering the room of a princess (especially one of marriageable age) without permission.

"Your Highness, I believe your personal escort will rush over here soon. Once I turn over your protection to him, I will go investigate."

*I feel bad for depriving Klaus of his already insufficient break, but having him around will be reassuring. Sir Leonhart is probably racing to the location of the trouble, and Ratte, Crow, and the others will protect me. It'll be fine. As I assured myself, my trembling lessened.*

*But still, what on earth happened? Did Lapter launch a surprise attack? If so,*

*they're being awfully ostentatious about it. What are they thinking? The shrine maiden has been summoned, so I understand that they have not a moment to waste if they wish to revive the demon lord. Still, their execution seems too crude.*

*I don't know how many people have managed to infiltrate the castle grounds, but our country's knights aren't so incompetent that they'd allow intruders to slip away. Assassins can't fulfill their objectives if they're captured, so it's an ironclad rule that they must be covert. Or...perhaps this uproar is because someone was discovered stealing into the castle?*

While I was running through the possibilities in my mind, I had unconsciously put too much force into my hands. Nero meowed loudly in protest at my unnecessarily strong grip and kicked off my arms to jump away.

I stumbled and a piteous cry escaped from my throat. “Hwah?!”

In contrast to my dear cat (who landed magnificently on the ground), I lost my balance and almost fell. Panicked, I threw my hand out and caught myself on the door.

“Your Highness?! Please pardon my intrusion!”

The clamor surprised the knight and, judging the situation to be urgent, he opened the door with only a few words of warning. As soon as he did, Nero seized the opportunity to slip through the small gap—he ran outside.

“Nero, no!” Stepping halfway out from behind the door, I reached for my precious pet. I held out my palm faceup. “Come here,” I called, but Nero stared down the hallway, unmoving.

“Your Highness, I will catch him. Please, remain inside your room.”

The knight turned away from me and approached Nero. However, his impatience was reflected in his noisy footsteps, and Nero, who had not reacted up until now, peered back warily. Nero was not particularly shy around strangers, but in the end, a cat was still a cat; it was only natural for him to be frightened when someone suddenly approached.

And so, my beloved pet avoided the knight's reach and scampered away.

“Nero!” I yelled again. This time, he finally reacted to my voice and stopped at the turn in the hallway to face me. “It’s dangerous that way. Come back here,” I pleaded desperately, crouching on the ground with my arms spread wide.

Nero’s pretty, triangular ears flicked and he continued staring. He halted completely, and his blue, gemlike eyes reflected my visage. I called for him once more.

“Please. Come here, Nero.”

My earnest plea seemed to reach him, and he slowly plodded back to me. Nero made a point to steer clear of the knight, staying close to the edge of the hallway, until he finally walked in front of me and nuzzled his head against the palm of my hand. I let out a sigh of relief and lifted Nero into my arms.

The knight lowered his head deeply in apology and shame, but I shook my head, urging him not to castigate himself. I was able to return to my room safe and sound—that was all that mattered. I rubbed my cheeks against Nero, who was curled up and docile in my arms, and then turned to reenter my room.

“Lady Rosemary! Are you safe?!”

“Klaus.”

My personal guard was in a considerable state of panic as he sprinted down the corridor. Instead of his usual knight’s uniform, he was lightly dressed in a white shirt and pants. His uniform jacket was tucked under his arm and he was holding his scabbard in his left hand, presumably because he hadn’t taken the time to put on his sword belt. His shirt was wrinkled and his hair was a mess. It was a far cry from the usual Klaus, who always had a tidy and clean appearance.

His shoulders shook as he gasped for breath. Once he confirmed that I was unharmed, he let out a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness... I’m glad you’re safe.”

“Yes, I’m just fine.”

Worries alleviated, Klaus suddenly realized his wretched state and his expression turned a bit embarrassed. “I apologize for the unsightly presentation.”

As I watched Klaus comb his fingers through his disheveled hair, a rude



thought crossed my mind. *Huh, so Klaus does know how to feel shame...*

Just as he'd promised, the knight who'd been guarding my room headed deeper into the castle after Klaus replaced him. After I saw him off, I returned my attention to Klaus.

"Do you know what the noise is about?"

By this point, Klaus had donned his uniform jacket and finished fastening his buttons. He frowned. "I do not."

*Was this unexpected to the royal guard as well? Or is it something that I can't imagine?* Klaus had sunk into silence while wearing a grave expression, so I didn't try to press him for more information. *It would be best to obediently wait inside my room.* I raised my head to let Klaus know my intent, but suddenly, the air surrounding Klaus changed.

Like a beast who'd caught wind of some noise, Klaus lowered his stance, hand on his sword. His sharp eyes were focused on the corridor ahead. Unsure of what he was reacting to, I blinked in confusion. A few seconds later, I heard thumping coming from down the hall.

It was the sound of hurried footsteps drawing close.

Klaus moved in front of me protectively. Eventually, two petite silhouettes came into sight: two women running toward us, hand in hand. One of them had an unusual hair length for a female resident of the castle, and I immediately identified the pair—the shrine maiden was being pulled along by a maid.

*As I thought... The intruders were after the shrine maiden.*

It didn't look like there were any pursuers chasing after the fleeing women, but Sir Leonhart was nowhere to be seen either. Even if they were escaping to a secure location, it was still irresponsible to leave the shrine maiden with only a maid.

*Did they haphazardly abscond before Sir Leonhart arrived? At any rate, we have to protect them.*

"Come this way!" I called.

The shrine maiden noticed Klaus and me standing in the hallway and I offered

her my hand.

“What? U-Um.” The maid hesitated, realizing who I was.

“Don’t worry, we can talk afterward!” I insisted. Now wasn’t the time to worry about status. I forced them into my room and turned back to my guard.

“Klaus. Please be on alert.”

“Leave it to me,” he replied gallantly.

I nodded and turned to head inside but then stopped. “Oh. Also, I want to send notice to Sir Leonhart. Please let him know that she’s here. He might be searching for her, after all.”

“Understood. I will ask any passing knights to relay the message.”

*Klaus is very reliable during emergencies.* After hearing his instantaneous replies, it felt like the lump of unease inside of me was shrinking.

My serious expression softened. “Thank you,” I added. “I’m counting on you.”

Klaus’s eyes widened, then narrowed happily, and his cheeks flushed red. “Please leave it to me,” he replied, respectfully lowering his head.

I left the rest to him and withdrew to my room. After taking a deep breath, I faced the shrine maiden and her maid. The two were standing straight as boards behind the sofa. They didn’t sit down inside my spacious room but stuck together, as if they had only each other to rely on.

*It’s best not to overstimulate them, but I can’t just leave them there either...* While I brooded over how to handle my two guests with tact, Nero slipped out of my arms. He landed by my feet, stared up at me, and meowed.

The shrine maiden raised her head. “A cat...?” she whispered hoarsely. Her small face was pitifully pallid and her large eyes were moist with tears. Her slender shoulders trembled and her lips looked a bit blue.

The poor girl was clearly in a terrible fright, so I smiled as gently as I could, trying not to startle her. “Do you like cats?”

Taken aback by the sudden question, the shrine maiden’s eyes wandered around the room, lost. Finally, after a few seconds, she gave me a small nod.

“I adore cats too. This is my pet. His name is Nero.” I dropped my gaze to Nero, who was circling around my legs. “If you’d like, please be friends with him.”

The shrine maiden had her gaze fixed upon Nero. She wiped the tears welling up in her eyes, sniffled, and squatted where she stood, extending her hand.

“Here kitty... I mean, Nero? Come here.”

Nero’s ears twitched and he looked up at me. It seemed almost like he was asking me for permission, though that was probably my egotistical hope as his owner. I nodded and Nero approached the shrine maiden. He gently nuzzled his head up against the girl’s palm.

“He’s so fluffy,” she murmured. She picked him up in her arms and buried her face in his soft fur.

*Nero let someone he met for the first time pick him up? Without putting up any resistance? My little Nero is such a clever little cat. He can read the mood! He’s much smarter than I am.*

The shrine maiden enjoyed the feeling of Nero’s wonderful fur for a while. With the help of animal therapy, she seemed to calm a bit. Her large doe eyes peeked up at me inquisitively.

“E-Excuse me... Who are you...?” she asked.

“L-Lady Fuzuki—” The maid tried to stop her, but I silenced her with my eyes.

We were not in a formal setting, and besides, the shrine maiden was not a denizen of this world. Luckily, there were no other prying eyes around us, so there was no need to raise a fuss about making a royal state her own name first.

“I’m Rosemary, the first princess of this country.”

“Huh?” A lovely sound leaked out of the shrine maiden’s equally lovely lips. “What? A...princess? A real princess? Well, you certainly are sparkly...and really pretty...”

The shrine maiden froze, eyes round as she stared at me. She looked like an adorable little animal. Her long lashes fluttered a few times and then her hazel

eyes narrowed, spellbound.

“You’re so beautiful that you look like you jumped out of a picture book...” she murmured dreamily before suddenly returning to her senses. “I mean, uh! I’m sorry! That was a very rude thing to say to a princess, wasn’t it?!”

Startled by the shrine maiden’s flustered movements, Nero jumped out of her arms. At that moment, the small cloth bag that hung around her neck swung back and forth. From the way it swayed, I could tell that it held something with a bit of heft.

“Ah, Nero! Wait, no, Princess. I-I’m sorry! My name is Fuzuki Kanon.”

*Fuzuki Kanon. I think that was the heroine’s default name. I remember in my past life I thought that not only was the heroine cute in appearance and personality, but even her name was lovely. She shares her name with my favorite song too. It suits a gorgeous and bright girl like her perfectly.*

The shrine maiden bowed repeatedly, so I spoke kindly to soothe her. “Don’t worry. There’s nothing to apologize for. Please, calm yourself. Okay?”

She seemed overwhelmed, but I somehow managed to get her seated on the sofa. I urged the maid to sit down as well, but she gave me a firm refusal. She looked very pale, so I didn’t force her.

“Could you tell me as much as you can about what happened?” I asked.

“Yes... But, to tell you the truth, I don’t really *know* what happened. I was sleeping when I suddenly woke up to a loud noise, and then there were people I didn’t recognize standing inside my room.”

*The loud noise was likely the sound of glass shattering that I heard. If strangers made an appearance directly afterward, then they must’ve trespassed through her window.*

“They covered my head with a cloth or something, so I don’t know what they looked like...but I think there were three of them. They were built quite big so I think they were all men. They pointed their swords at me and...” The shrine maiden quivered when she recalled what’d happened. She paled and hugged herself tightly as if trying to withstand a frigid chill.

I had been sitting on a single-seater sofa, but I moved next to her and gently placed my hands on her shoulders. *The shrine maiden has been living a peaceful life in Japan, so having a sword thrust up toward her must have been a huge shock. Of course she's frightened out of her wits.*

"I'm sorry for making you remember all that," I apologized.

The shrine maiden shook her head. "I'm fine." Distraught, she tried to smile, but tears were forming in the corners of her eyes and the area around them looked red as well. It was heartbreaking to see her like this.

"I was distressed, so I don't remember much. After I screamed, she"—the shrine maiden turned to the maid—"and the guards came rushing in... Then she took my hand and we ran away from my room. I was so caught up with my own safety that I have no idea what happened to the guards. I'm sorry, I..."

"Thank you for telling me. The knights of our country are very strong, so I'm sure they're fine." I smiled reassuringly at her, and I felt the shrine maiden relax when I said that. Then, I turned toward the maid. "You must have been terrified too, but you did well—both of you got out."

The maid's shoulders jumped with a start. Her pallor was terrible, and she looked like she'd keel over at any moment. She hung her head so I couldn't tell what expression she was making.

*What's wrong? Are you shrinking back because I'm a princess?*

"What...should I do now?" asked the shrine maiden.

"Did you see Sir Leonhart, um, the royal guard captain?"

She shook her head.

*If she fled on Sir Leonhart's command then it'd be best for her to stay here until things settle down, but since it wasn't, we should convene with him for instructions.*

"I wonder if the captain is looking for me..." the shrine maiden muttered, her eyes fixed upon the door.

"I entrusted my guard to deliver him a message. I'm sure he'll come to get you once things are handled on his side."

When I uttered “he’ll come to get you,” I felt a little sting in my chest. *I’m such a fool. Now is not the time to be jealous that Sir Leonhart is going to pick her up.* My negative emotions had leaked a little bit but I quickly put a lid on them and concentrated on assuaging the shrine maiden’s fears.

“He’ll come soon, won’t he? I heard the captain is awfully strong...so he’ll be fine, right?” Her gaze was full of trust and yearning toward Sir Leonhart.

I ignored the throbbing that persisted in my heart and nodded. The tension left the shrine maiden’s countenance and her lips broke into a large smile. She exhaled deeply.

*Yes, I get it.* It was being hammered into me over and over that her voice, her expressions—everything about her was cute. Her charm could invoke anyone’s protective instincts. I felt a sense of defeat rising up within me.

*If only I had even a tenth...no, even a hundredth of her cuteness. If only I could honestly cry in a scary situation the way she does...*

I shook my head, trying to clear myself of deplorable thoughts. Deciding to switch mental gears, I raised my head and called out to the maid once more. “I’m sure things will be settled soon, so please, sit down and rest...”

“Eek!” The maid had her back to us, and when I addressed her, she gasped in surprise for some reason. She whipped around with a start.

As she did, a dark shadow leaped at her.

“Ouch!” she cried out.

Nero had bitten her hand...which was holding an object. It gleamed dully in the light. I recognized the shape—a thin dagger.

The maid shook Nero off and slammed him against the wall.

“Nero!” I screamed, but he did not react. At the sight of his limp body, another scream rose from the back of my throat.

“Wh-What? Why are you...?”

“Lady Fuzuki, please forgive me!”

The maid gripped the dagger firmly with both hands and advanced toward the

shrine maiden. The girl tried to run away from the knife, but her legs gave way and she collapsed onto the ground.

Numerous questions were bouncing around in my head. *Why is a Nevel maid doing this? Why is she attacking the shrine maiden? Wait, was luring her out of her room a trap? The intruders were a distraction and she was the actual threat?* Muddled questions popped up one after another, but not a single one left my mouth.

Instead, the only thing that burst out was a desperate shriek.

“No!”

Logic and reason left me. My mind was in chaos, but there was one thing I knew: I couldn't allow a young girl who'd been dragged into a conflict between two countries to get injured for such an absurd reason.

The maid raised the dagger and I instantly threw my body on top of the shrine maiden.

# The Personal Guard's Agitation

"Klaus."

"Captain, this way."

Not long after Lady Rosemary returned to her room, the captain finally arrived, accompanied by a few other knights. I began to give him a concise report of what had taken place. While I was explaining where our guest from another world was, the captain suddenly looked up with a start. I, too, noticed noise coming from the princess's room and quickly turned around.

His reaction was just barely faster than my own—he immediately kicked open the door.

The captain inhaled deeply as soon as he entered the room. I followed after him, a beat slower, and saw two figures lying on top of each other on the floor. Hovering over the cowering figures was the maid from earlier, brandishing a dagger.

I couldn't see their faces, but I knew who the one shielding the shrine maiden was... Her wavy, platinum-blond hair gave it away.

The maid had attacked Lady Rosemary.

The moment I processed that, my blood boiled and I felt a seething rage. *Who are you daring to point your blade at?!* An enraged roar like that of a wild beast almost burst forth from within me, but I clenched my jaw and swallowed those feelings. I gnashed my teeth and an unpleasant noise echoed inside of my mouth.

Immediately, I unclenched my fist and grabbed the hilt of my sword. However, the captain moved faster than I—he hurled something at the woman's dagger hand.

"Ah?!" she cried out. The dagger fell.

Her dagger and the captain's chosen projectile—his shortsword sheath—both



impacted the floor with a loud clatter. The maid's attention fell upon her dagger, and in that single moment, the captain closed in and captured her. His fluid motions seized control of the room so quickly that no one else could raise a finger.

"Restrain her," he ordered.

"Yes, sir." Following his command, two knights bound the maid's arms.

The pale maid shook her head fervently, eyes filled with tears. "I-I was threatened! I didn't turn traitor because I wanted to!" She continued to plead desperately to the captain even while held down.

*Is she making excuses to protect herself? Or is she telling the truth? Regardless of which it is, that's not to be judged here.*

The maid broke down. "P-Please, believe—" But her bawling was cut short midway by her own strained cry. "Eek!"

I followed her gaze to the captain and even I reflexively gulped. He didn't look angry. His black eyes were as serene as a windless night ocean. His expression was blank, accentuating his chiseled face. It was as if all emotions had fallen away. He looked like a still work of art.

And yet, somehow...I could feel an immeasurable wrath. His fury was so intense that I feared it turning upon me—I felt that if I blinked or even took a single breath, he would take my life. I was still only gripping the hilt of my sword, but my palms were damp with sweat. It even felt harder to breathe, though that was probably just an illusion. The air was overwhelmingly tense, and no one in the room, including me, could move...not the maid, the knights holding her down, or even the knights who'd come in from the hallway to check on the situation.

It was as if a jet-black lion had suddenly oozed out of the darkness to bare its deadly fangs, and the only thing we could do was hold our breath in hopes that it would pass.

That oppressive silence suffocated us for what felt like an eternity...until it was broken by the unmistakable voice of my beloved master.

"Sir... Leon...?" She sounded as defenseless as a small child.

The moment we heard her warm, soft voice, so unbefitting of the circumstances, the tension in the atmosphere vanished. The captain cast his eyes down and exhaled, almost as if he were expelling the intense ire from his viscera. The aura he exuded changed completely, and when his black eyes looked up again, the captain I knew was back.

“We will interrogate you another day and hear what you have to say...” he stated. “Take her away.”

“U-Understood!” The two knights who had frozen replied in unison. They supported the dazed maid from both sides and exited the room.

The captain knelt in front of Lady Rosemary. “Your Highness, are you hurt?”

“I’m fine... Ah, Lady Fuzuki, are you injured anywhere?”

In contrast to the captain—whose brows were lowered with concern as he peered at her closely—Lady Rosemary appeared to still be disoriented about what had happened. Dazed, she managed to prop herself up. Underneath her lay our guest from another world, Lady Fuzuki.

*Did my master risk her life to protect her? Really, what am I to do...? She doesn't change, no matter how much time passes. She refuses to change.*

Though waited upon by many, she did not realize her own worth. Lady Rosemary would readily sacrifice herself for the sake of anyone standing before her eyes. Though I respected her noble soul, I could not bring myself to applaud her for it.

I (and countless others) followed Lady Rosemary because of her kind, beautiful heart. I knew that if she lost it, then the most essential facet of her identity would be blemished...but I still wanted her to be more selfish. I harbored a desire that I could never speak of: I wished for her to live on, even at the expense of others.

“Ow, ow...” Lady Fuzuki groaned as she rose. “I banged up my knee a bit when I fell, but that’s all... More importantly, Princess, are you okay?!”

Once Fuzuki returned to her senses, she raised her head and drew herself close to Lady Rosemary. “Are you hurt?! Did you get stabbed?!”

“I’m not hurt... Where’s Nero?” The light returned to Lady Rosemary’s hazy eyes. She surveyed her surroundings, eyes wide. “Nero!”

Spotting the black cat lying by the wall, Lady Rosemary hastily tried to stand. She rushed over to the cat; her legs were weak, so she stumbled many times over as she braced herself against the wall.

“Nero?” she called when she plopped down next to her pet.

Lady Rosemary slowly extended trembling fingers, but she hesitated. She’d frozen, refusing to accept that her dreadful doubts were becoming reality. The only way I could tell that time had not stopped was by the slight tremor in her fingers and her gradually worsening pallor.

“Your Highness.”

The captain dropped down to his knees next to Lady Rosemary. She didn’t seem like she would ever bring herself to touch her precious cat, so he held his hand out in her place. The captain caressed its little body with a delicate touch that I never would’ve imagined coming from his rugged, gruff hands.

He gently brushed his fingers against the cat’s chest and above its nose, checking for its pulse and breathing. Lady Rosemary watched as she held her breath. Her shaking hand gripped the captain’s cuff. She’d probably done it unconsciously; her heart wanted to cling to something.

She gave him a praying look. The captain met her gaze and nodded.

“I can feel him breathing. He must have passed out.”

“Really?” Lady Rosemary’s voice was trembling just like her hands.

The captain placed his hand on top of hers and nodded once more, firmly. “Yes. It’s possible that he’s injured, but it does not seem to be life-threatening.”

“Th-Thank...goodness...” A surge of relief washed over her expression, and she sounded as if she were about to burst into tears. Weary, her body swayed and she toppled to the side, collapsing like a puppet whose strings had been cut. The captain caught her in his arms.

I rushed over. “Lady Rosemary?”

“She just fainted. That must’ve taken a load off her chest,” the captain

replied.

He stood up, holding her as if he were handling a fragile object. He brought her to the bed and placed her gently down. As he gazed at her sleeping face, I realized that I had never seen him wear such a tender expression.

After a moment, the captain turned around. “Lady Fuzuki.”

“Yesh?!” Lady Fuzuki responded, jumping up with a start. Her face was bright red—in all likelihood, it was due to being exposed to the emotional exchange between the captain and Lady Rosemary.

“Can you stand? You mentioned that you were unharmed, but I will call a doctor to examine you, just in case.”

“Yes, I can stand! On my own, of course!” Scarlet faced and panicking, Lady Fuzuki shot up straight. Her eyes restlessly darted around the room as she patted the dust off her clothes.

“Good. Then let’s move to a different room.”

The captain placed the little black cat in its basket bed and lifted it up, likely to request that the doctor examine the cat after Lady Fuzuki.

“Klaus, take care of the rest.”

“Understood.”

I wanted to remain by Lady Rosemary’s side until the morning, but I couldn’t stay in her room. I left together with the captain and Lady Fuzuki, watching them go.

“Ah!” came a quiet yelp.

“Is something the matter?” asked the captain.

The source of the small cry was Lady Fuzuki. She suddenly stopped walking and timidly raised a hand to the cloth bag hanging around her neck. All the color drained from her face. She turned deathly pale as she frantically undid the cord and opened the bag. When she looked inside, her eyes widened.

“Wh-What do I do...? I screwed up...”

Her voice quivered uncontrollably. I had no idea what she was referring to,

but from the captain's harsh expression, I knew it was a dire predicament.

# The Reincarnated Princess Caught between Dreams and Reality

It felt like I had been dreaming for a very long time, though I didn't remember what I'd been dreaming of. My head was boiling and my mind was in disarray. I couldn't move properly and I was assailed by an unrelenting, dull ache. On top of that, my throat hurt and I felt terrible all over.

I had been a hale and hearty child growing up, so this was an exceptionally bad state for me. The symptoms coincided with what I remembered from distant memories—I had a cold. It was an inevitable result since I had wandered around in the dead of night in nothing but light nightwear.

There was a continuous haze shrouding my mind—no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't pull together coherent thoughts. It felt like the world was crumbling around me, a sandcastle being swept up by waves. I slept in a daze, and when I thought I had awoken from my stupor, I fell asleep again. I occasionally sensed the presence of people beside me, but I didn't remember much.

When I finally woke up, it was dark and no one was around. It may sound silly, but I felt terribly lonely, as if I were the last person alive in this world, so I forced my eyes closed again to push that sensation away. Even in another world, the helpless feeling that came with being sick remained the same.

How much time had I spent in this fuzzy state unable to tell dream from reality?

Suddenly, my thirst overcame me and I opened my eyes again. This time, my room was dimly lit. I thought it might be dawn or dusk, but it was neither. The faint light came from a lantern by my bed. Through the gaps in the curtains of my room, I could tell that it was pitch-black outside.

Only the occasional scuffling of paper disturbed the serene silence that engulfed the room. The constant rhythm of paper was coming from someone reading a book next to my bed. It wasn't an unpleasant noise. In fact, I found it

calming.

As I began nodding off again, the dry pain from my throat pulled me back to consciousness. I coughed, and whoever was next to me shifted.

“I see you’re awake.”

I...couldn’t place my finger on whom that voice belonged to. It wasn’t that I didn’t recall hearing that low, exquisite timbre. No, it was just that the owner of that voice would never be here, so I automatically crossed him off the list of possibilities.

Though I tried to think about who it could be, the pain from my violent coughing made it impossible to do so. Tears from the pain blurred my vision, making it even harder to discern who the person was.

I turned to the side and curled up into a ball, trying to endure the stinging pain. A large hand rubbed my back, soothing my breathing. I didn’t know who it was, but strangely enough, I wasn’t discomforted by their touch. My suffering alleviated slightly once my cough settled down. I returned to lying on my back, breathing deeply over and over. That certain someone wiped away the tears from around my eyes.

“I’ll help you, so try sitting up for a bit. You must be thirsty.”

As the voice offered, I put my weight on his arm and he stuck a pillow behind my back. I had a fever, so even the smallest movement drained me. He gently leaned me back on the pillow, letting me sink comfortably into the cushion, and he held a cup up to my lips.

I was certainly parched and I gratefully parted my dry lips. *I’m acting like a little kid*, I thought in the back of my mind, but I didn’t have the energy to keep up any appearances. The feeling of water flowing down my inflamed throat was pleasant. I took a few more sips and, once sated, I exhaled deeply. The pain in my throat had subsided. Drowsiness returned to me.

As I started nodding off once more, I glanced at the person sitting next to me. He put the cup down and wrung out a cloth that had been soaking in a washbowl. Such a mundane task did not befit him at all. He leaned over to place the wet cloth on my forehead. His pale-blue eyes peered out from under his

flawless, platinum-blond bangs. Our eyes met.

“Fa...ther?”

*No way, no way! That can't be possible. I'm such a dummy for even considering that for a moment!* I immediately scolded myself for letting the word spill out of my mouth.

His handsome visage was so beautiful that one wouldn't think he was the father of three. He opened his unsmiling mouth. “What is it?”

His response confirmed that the man in front of me was indeed my father. *Which means, this is...*

“A...dream?” I whispered weakly in a husky voice, nodding to myself internally.

*Yeah. This must be a dream. I don't really understand why I would dream about father when I'm feeling despondent, but this must be a dream. There's no other explanation.*

The father in my dream let out an exasperated sigh. “Think whatever you wish. Hurry up and sleep,” he said, slapping the wet cloth a bit roughly on my forehead.

It felt like there really was a cool fabric there, but surely, it must've just been my imagination.

“Why...are you here?” I questioned.

It was my dream, so I couldn't help but wonder about the strange casting choice. Since this was in my mind, I was really just talking to myself...but I'd asked the (fake) father in front of me anyway.

My father astutely raised a brow. “I heard that my foolish daughter, whose only redeeming feature is her robust health, has a fever. I came to see her idiotic face.”

I silently wrinkled my brows. *Why is his imitation so pointlessly high quality? I didn't need to perfectly reproduce even his sharp tongue!* I cursed myself for having such a powerful imagination. *I guess it's not like I can even imagine how he would act as a kind father. During times like this, he should be pampering*



*me... Never mind. That'd be terrifying and definitely not my father.* I shoosed away an imaginary rendition of my father smiling widely.

"You protected our guest," he continued, tone impassive.

"Huh?"

Taking the foolish noise that had slipped out of me as a question, he repeated himself with slightly different words. "I heard that you protected our guest from another world. I suppose I should commend you for a job well done."

My father's voice was flat, and it didn't sound like he was praising me. *I feel like he's said stuff like this in the past, so I guess this is like an amalgamated retrospection of sorts. There was something about being "unable to leave his daughter alone because she's like a wild boar who only knows how to dive headfirst without calculating odds of success." Man...I feel pissed off just remembering that.*

*Foolish daughter? Wild boar? Idiotic face? How can you say such things to your adolescent daughter?!* I wanted to rage at him, but doing so would just be another soliloquy. I'd feel ridiculous yapping at him inside my own imagination. And...I couldn't deny that it wasn't true.

"We borrowed that girl from another realm and she's an extremely important existence for our world. We can't let harm come her way. With only that in mind, you made the correct decision." My father's deep voice was pleasant to the ears.

"I don't know whether something is right or wrong... I just don't want to see anyone get hurt," I mumbled, half-asleep.

"That's a naive way to think." Imaginary father snorted disparagingly at me.

*I've heard someone say that dreams are manifestations of your subconscious. Does this mean I want to be scolded?*

I knew he wasn't complimenting my efforts, so a conflicted smile formed on my lips. "Yes, it really is."

My father's brows furrowed. I repeat, my father, who was expressionless by default, was making a *sour* face.

*That's a rare sight. Wow, my imagination is amazing for no special reason.*

"If you live like that, you'll die before your parents."

Shocked by how bitter he sounded, my eyes widened. His lecture had taken an unexpected direction and I didn't know what to do or say.

After leaving me speechless, my father turned toward the door. "Why don't you admonish her as well?"

*Who's over there?* I couldn't see anyone, but father continued to talk without bothering to fill me in.

"How long do you plan on loitering in front of her door? I pity the knights standing guard. Hurry up and come inside."

*He's addressing them like family... Is it my older brother?* Curious as to who would appear next in my dream, I leaned my head to the side. I held the wet cloth to my head to stop it from slipping off as I watched the door open.

A gorgeous woman whose beauty bloomed bewitchingly like a rose, even in the darkness, diffidently entered the room. This beauty, who usually maintained a standoffish and composed demeanor, was staring down at her feet with a forlorn expression...like a child about to be reprimanded.

Indeed, a person far more unbelievable than my father had arrived...

*If dreams reflect my desires, then I must be mad... This is bold, even for me!* I simpered at my ludicrous situation, tears trickling down my cheek.

"Mother...?"

The apparition in the form of my mother raised her head, startled. Her full, crimson lips moved to form words but then paused. In the end, the sounds that threatened to spill out remained voiceless and disappeared in the back of her throat. My mother stayed by the door as if her feet were sewn to the ground. Father observed us wordlessly, and me being me, I didn't know what to say, resulting in an awkward silence falling over the room.

My mother stood stock-still, eyes lowered. She looked ephemeral, like she might melt into the darkness of the night. If I watched her long enough, she would inevitably disappear in due time. Wordlessly, without leaving a single

trace behind. She'd fade away from my memories when I woke up the next morning.

*That would be fine; I'd merely be returning to normalcy.* I knew that, but I couldn't bring myself to look on silently. For some reason...I was scared to let this moment end as just an illusion. I didn't know what else to do but struggle in vain to move my body. I tried to push myself up with my hand, but my arm was too weak and it buckled under my weight.

"Ah."

"Rose!"

I collapsed, lurching out of bed. My mother extended her arm toward me, but she was still near the entrance and wouldn't make it in time. I closed my eyes, bracing myself for impact.

But no matter how long I waited, no pain greeted me. I gingerly opened my eyes to see my father's sublime visage at point-blank range.

"What are you doing?" he asked, exasperated.

He'd caught me in his arms and also, magnificently, had caught the cloth that'd slipped off my forehead. He crudely flung it aside and it landed in the washbowl with a little splish. *Splendid precision, father.*

Over my father's shoulder, I could see my mother frozen with her arm still outstretched. Our eyes met and her grim expression softened. The tension left her fingers as she slowly lowered her arm.

"Behave yourself at least when you're sick," my father recited acerbically as he placed me back on the bed.

Though his tone was harsh, his touch was gentle. I had no idea how to act, so I floundered. My eyes roamed the room nervously and found my mother's once more. But, this time, she briskly averted her gaze. She kept glancing behind her as if she were about to flee the scene at any moment.

"Mo...ther..." I called out weakly.

Her shoulders shook, but no matter how much time passed, no reply came forth. Awkward silence returned and lingered until it was broken by my father's

terse sigh.

“She’s calling for you,” he said evenly. He was not trying to criticize or comfort my mother, merely relaying the truth.

Prompted by his words, my mother took one step forward. She took another slow step, then another, until finally, she stopped next to my bed.

“I’ll let you take care of the rest,” my father said, standing up from his chair with his book in hand.

Even if left alone with my mother, I didn’t know what we would talk about, so an unwitting plea leaked from my mouth. “Father...”

But the king scoffed. He placed his hand on my head and ruffled my hair. “Fix it quickly.” After making a mess of my hair, he left the room.

The only two remaining were me with a disheveled head and my mother, who was standing stiff as a board. The awkward silence felt even more stifling than before.

Unsure what would be appropriate, I decided it’d be best if she sat down first. “Mo—” Instead of my own voice, a hoarse whisper leaked out from my mouth. It felt like there was something stuck to the back of my throat, and I began to hack violently. A dull ache descended upon my neck and chest. I tried to suppress my cough, but that only backfired and made it worse.

Tears welled up in my eyes from the pain, blurring my vision, but I could still make out my mother’s pale face.

“Mo...ther...?”

She stood still, hand half-open, her panicked eyes darting around. “D-Do you need medicine? No, I should call a doctor. Wait right here!” My mother trotted over to the door.

“Huh?”

*It’s the middle of the night and she’s going to rouse the court physician because of this? I just have a cold.*

“M-Mother! Wait!” I tried to lift myself out of bed again.

She hurried back to me, pale faced. “Wh-Why do you keep trying to get up?! Be good and lie down!”

“No, um, urk?!” I tried to form coherent words, but I yelped when my mother lifted the blanket over my face. I wiggled my head out of the blanket and said, “I don’t need medicine or a doctor. It was just a small cough. I’m fine.”

My mother’s brows lowered in consternation. “You sounded like you were suffering. How can you be fine?!”

“It’s just a cold. I’ll recover if I rest. Oh, I want to cool my forehead. Could you wring out that cloth for me?”

*It looks like the court physician’s good night’s sleep depends on me. Maybe she’ll calm down if I give her something to do.* I pointed at the washbowl.

“You want this? Okay.”

My mother’s attention turned to the cloth and I let out a sigh of relief. I closed my eyes, taking the opportunity to breathe. But then a worry suddenly crossed my mind: *does my mother know how to nurse a patient?* I was about to remind her to properly squeeze all the water out when a dripping, saturated cloth plopped on my head.

*Ah, nice and cool. And sopping wet.*

“Now what? What should I do next?”

Seeing my mother so keen on helping made a tepid laugh fill my heart. *If I tell her I want a sip of water, something even more disastrous will happen.*

“Nothing,” I replied quietly. “I don’t need anything else.”

“What?” my mother asked, voicing her surprise. She sounded perplexed and dismayed, like an abandoned child.

*Oooh, how sly! How can I act cold if you look at me like that?*

A smile played over my lips and I held my hand out. “I don’t need anything so...please stay by my side.”

Stupefied and confused, mother hesitantly touched my hand. She then wrapped her hands around mine and took a seat where my father had just

been. Silence blanketed the room once more, but this time, it didn't feel awkward.

"You..."

"Huh?" I uttered questioningly.

My mother gripped my hand, inspecting its shape. "You've grown so much," she said, enunciating each word with great care.

My eyes widened and I peered up. Our eyes locked.

A bitter, self-loathing smile formed on her lips. "You must think it's far too late for me to say such things now."

I blinked at her. *It sounds like she's prepared to be criticized by me. Too late, huh... I'm certainly wondering why she's talking to me like this so far along in my upbringing...but there's something else that confounds me even more.*

"I thought...you didn't care for me, mother."

Her lovely brows drooped, and she cast down her eyes with a sigh. "It's only natural that you think that. I've never done anything for you or Johan... I ran away from both of you."

"You ran away?" I parroted.

Mother nodded. "Yes. I thought that if I was to be hated, I might as well separate myself from you two of my own volition."

Her words were mind-boggling, but I didn't find them dubious.

"Selfish, aren't I?" Her eyes smiled, but the sorrow in them told me that she wasn't lying. She spun her words together one by one, and I quietly listened.

Her tale was fragmented, like a jigsaw puzzle with missing pieces. Even when I tried to put it all together, I couldn't get the whole picture. But I somehow managed to understand the gist of her story. And what did I learn? Apparently, my mother was an unbelievably clumsy person when it came to relationships.

When we were young, my mother had restricted Johan and me to our rooms in a desperate attempt to garner our father's attention for herself. She'd thought we could be a family that way. It was a warped imagining, but she'd

believed that was what family was...because she'd never known what having one was like.

When I'd finally defied her, she'd realized that she had no one around her. Not even a shred remained of the family she had frantically tried to scrape together. Johan had left to study abroad and I'd gone on a journey. *What did my mother think about as she sat alone in her room?*

"I was perfectly fine when you both left... At least, I should've been." I felt my mother's grip tighten.

The small twinge of pain made me look up at her. I gasped. Her face was contorted with anguish—so terribly twisted—as she held back her tears. And yet, somehow, she was so stunningly beautiful that it left me speechless.

"It never occurred to me that I may never see you again."

"Mo...ther."

"I didn't know there was something more terrifying than being hated and scorned by my children. I'm such a fool. It didn't dawn on me until I almost lost you...like I was a character in a mediocre, lowbrow play."

I was surprised, but I also recalled my father's words from earlier as well as the bitter look on his face. *"If you live like that, you'll die before your parents."*

"Hate me, curse me, I don't care any longer. Just please don't disappear somewhere beyond my reach." She clung to my hands and pressed her forehead against them. I could feel her quivering slightly.

I finally processed my mother's expression and my father's words—it led me to one conclusion.

*Oh, I see... I was loved this whole time.*

They were clumsy people who were difficult to understand, but they had been pouring their love into me. It was galling and I really, really didn't want to admit it...but I was so happy that I wanted to cry.

"Mother."

Her moist, blue eyes turned toward me questioningly.

“Will you hold my hand until I fall asleep?”

She blinked at me a few times and then her bewildered gaze wandered around the room. However, she didn't let go of my hand. Head turned away, she nodded. I wanted to ask, “*Why are your pretty ears so red?*” But that would have been insensitive of me.

I let out a small giggle and my mother shot a sharp glance at me before raising the blanket over my shoulders. *Please don't let this be just a dream*, I wished as I shut my eyes.



# Bad News for the Reincarnated Princess

Light shone through my closed eyelids; the radiance rapidly aroused my consciousness. I lifted my hand up to block the rays, but the morning sun would not be obstructed so easily. I cracked open my eyes slightly. Through the curtains, I could tell that the sun was already quite high up in the sky. It looked to be just before noon. I had overslept considerably.

Now that I was well rested, my head felt clear. The headache that had plagued me until yesterday was also gone—it was a pleasant awakening. I knew I should get up, but dozing felt so congenial that my body wouldn't move. *Just five more minutes*, I groaned to no one in particular. I turned over and brushed against something soft.

Still half asleep, I didn't recognize what the soft sensation was. It was squishy, comforting, warm...and it smelled very nice. I snuggled closer for a good sniff and then felt something caress my hair. My eyes shot open when I realized that I was in someone's embrace.

Pressed against my eyes was an ample valley. I looked down past the neckline of a nightgown, gawking at dazzling alabaster skin. When she stirred, the two mountains jiggled—two mounds that I yearned for greatly.

I timidly looked up to see a slender neck and a shapely chin. Her plump lips were scarlet, though she was not wearing lipstick, and her brows arched elegantly above the bridge of her nose. Her blue eyes framed with long eyelashes were trained upon me. Though bleary-eyed from just having woken up, her eyes sparkled like brilliant gems.

“Good morning, Rose. How are you feeling?” she asked in a husky tone.

If I were a man, I would've erupted into a nosebleed. My eyes were wide open as I gaped at this woman who was oozing with sex appeal first thing in the morning. *I'm glad that yesterday wasn't a dream...but...but...*

“Mother, why are you sleeping with me?” I asked.

She tilted her head to the side, puzzled. “Of course I would sleep here.”

“O-Of course...?”

“What would you do if you had slept alone and your health took a sudden turn for the worse? More importantly, do you still have a fever?”

Mother swept up her bangs and pressed her forehead against mine. I was flummoxed at being treated like a child...not that I had any memories of her nursing me like this when I was young.

“It looks like your fever broke. Thank goodness.”

She held me close and her expression relaxed. Her eyes narrowed into an effervescent smile—she was as ravishing as a goddess. Then suddenly, as if she’d remembered something, her face turned serious. She wrapped her hands around my cheeks and peered into my eyes.

“Rose?”

“Yes?”

“Yesterday night, did you have any scary dreams?”

*A dream?* I repeated her words internally and tilted my head. I replayed last night’s events, but nothing in particular came to mind. *I feel like I was in a lengthy dream before father and mother arrived...but I don’t remember what it was about. I slept soundly last night because mother held my hand.*

“I don’t think I had any.”

“Does your body feel different? Any pain or distress anywhere?”

*My throat still stings a bit, but it’s much better compared to yesterday. I don’t have a headache nor do I feel any nausea... It seems like I’ve almost fully recovered in a single night.*

“I feel fine,” I replied.

My mother let out a sigh of relief. “I see.”

As I mulled over the meaning behind her words, I heard a knock on the door. My mother sat up in bed and I followed suit.

“You have a visitor...” the guard announced, perturbed. His tone reminded

me of a certain night. Before we could even query who it was, the door swung open with hesitation.

“I’m coming in.”

To the surprise of no one, my father sauntered into the room, brazen attitude and all, showing no hint of remorse for walking in on the queen and princess still dressed in nightwear.

*Oh yeah. If mother wasn’t a dream...then yesterday, that was actually father...* Absentmindedly, I stared at his excessively well-sculpted face. I felt my mother place her slender hand on my shoulder and she drew me close. Eyes round, I looked up to see her solemn gaze fixed on father.

Astonished, words did not come to me immediately. My mother’s eyes were sharp, not inordinately so, but she didn’t look pleased to see him. I was flabbergasted as to why she looked like a protective mother baring her fangs to keep her kitten from being taken away.

The look on my father’s face said “*good grief*” as he let out a sigh. “I’m not going to gobble her up. Don’t look so menacing.”

“Then please let me sit in on whatever it is you have to say to her.”

“That’s what I planned from the beginning. I’ll be back in two hours. Finish getting ready by then.”

I wasn’t following my father and mother’s conversation at all, but they both seemed to be on the same page, and their exchange ended quickly. When I shot them a quizzical look, my father raised his hand up to me. He lifted my sweaty bangs and felt my forehead with his large palm.

“Looks like your fever dropped. How do you feel?”

“Good.”

“I see.”

My father’s tone was impassive, but his hands were as gentle as they had been last night. Strangely enough, he asked me questions similar to the ones my mother had just asked me: “Do you feel any irregularities?” and “Did you have any dreams?” I answered each one just as I had earlier.

“That’s good then.”

He brushed my bangs back into place with his fingers and then turned around. *What in the world is going on? What are they so worried about?* I spaced out as I watched him exit my room.

“Rose.” My mother’s voice snapped me out of my daze. “Let’s wipe you down before you get changed. You must feel uncomfortable and sticky, covered in sweat.”

“I’ll go take a bath...”

“No. Your fever has been quelled, but you’re still not fully recovered. You can take a bath tomorrow.” She sounded like she was placating a naughty child, and I could only weakly hang my head in response.

*I’m pretty much doused in sweat, so I want to take a nice, refreshing bath, but oh well.* I gave her a small nod and my mother stroked my head with a smile. It was a bit embarrassing to be treated like a young child, but I didn’t dislike it, which gave me mixed feelings.

My mother stood up from the bed and began giving instructions to the maids. She directed them to not only prepare hot water and a bathing cloth but also our meals. We leisurely finished making preparations for the day and then, as promised, my father returned right as two hours had passed.

I was surprised to see the shrine maiden trailing behind him. She looked awfully distressed and kept restlessly glancing around. When she spotted me, her eyes lit up and her cheeks flushed. She raised her arm, about to dash to me.

“Um!” she exclaimed.

But my father’s low voice stopped her in her tracks. “Miss Fuzuki.” She timidly looked up to meet his cold gaze and then her head slumped down dejectedly.

They came to my bed where I was sitting upright. My mother was standing close by, and she stood in front of me protectively.

“Her health is still poor, so do keep it brief.”

“It’ll only take a moment,” my father replied with a blasé look on his face. He turned to look at me. “The situation has become cumbersome while you were

unconscious.”

“Cumbersome?” I cocked my head quizzically.

My father’s brow furrowed and he frowned. “Yes. The stone broke.”

After a long pause, the only thing that slipped out of my mouth was a tiny “Huh?” His words were simple, but my brain couldn’t keep up. I just blankly stared at him, eyes bulging, and repeated his words in my head.

*The stone...broke? The stone broke? The first stone that comes to mind is an extremely dangerous one. You can’t possibly be referring to that one, right? Tell me it isn’t true...*

“The stone...broke?” I said, face stiffening with each word. “Surely you must be mistaken?”

The shrine maiden standing next to father looked like she wanted to flee the scene. She covered her face. *I’ve had a bad feeling this whole time. I even feel the fever coming back.*

“Unfortunately, it’s no mistake.” My father’s placid voice sounded terribly distant.

*My head hurts.* I looked down, pressing my hand against my forehead. My mother peered at me, concerned.

“Rose, are you feeling unwell? Do you want to lie down?”

“Thank you, mother. But I’m fine.”

I held up a hand to stop my mother from helping me, and an unsightly smile crept across my face.

*I’m probably twitching, but I hope they’ll overlook my disgraceful demeanor. I really want to faint and escape from reality, but I know that won’t solve anything.* I peeked over at my father, but his face was as unreadable as ever. *This was quite the grave announcement to make—you’d think he’d look the part, but that’d be foolhardy to ask of my father.*

“I understand.” I let out a long sigh. The shrine maiden flinched and her shoulders quivered. I hadn’t meant to attack her, but I had inadvertently intimidated her all the same. Realizing this, I hastily shook my head. “Lady

Fuzuki, please, raise your head. This is not your fault.”

I was trying to speak as gently as possible, but the shrine maiden trembled like a small animal about to be devoured. She peered at me with teary eyes, and guilt rained down on my conscience. *She’s adorable... No, wait, the poor thing. She’s so frightened... What did father say to her?* I glowered at him, and the number of wrinkles on his head multiplied.

“It was our country’s indiscretion that allowed our enemy to invade, and yet you blamed Lady Fuzuki?” I asked him.

But the shrine maiden replied in place of my father. “N-No! No one blamed me! But it’s all my fault! I...” Her pleas were so frantic that I worried she might faint from hyperventilating.

I reached out, gently touching her right hand and giving it a squeeze to calm and console her. Her large, dewy, doe-like eyes widened, and tears welled up in their corners. The shrine maiden vigorously wiped away the tears and began to speak once more.

“I usually kept it in that sturdy little box, but I moved it into a cloth bag without permission. I thought that if I kept it near me even while I slept, I could erase it even faster.”

*I see... So, on that night, it was hanging around her neck in that bag. She fell when she tried to dodge the knife, so it probably broke then.*

“I-I...I’ve done something dreadful!” she managed to say, tremors tainting her voice.

“It’s not your fault,” I said. The shrine maiden looked at me and I reiterated myself once more. “This was an unfortunate accident. The onus falls on our country for summoning you here against your will.”

I lightly tugged on her hand and slowly drew her closer to me. I wiped the tears spilling out of her large eyes and smiled at her to allay her anxiety. “You must’ve been so scared. You don’t have to hold it back anymore. Let it all out.”

The shrine maiden inhaled a sharp, husky breath and then her face crumpled. She spread her arms and flung them around me, more clinging than hugging. I was taken aback by the sudden embrace, but how could I possibly push her

away from me when she was bawling like a child?

Her slender shoulders quivered as she sobbed uncontrollably and I gently caressed her back. My father looked exasperated by the spectacle, but he watched in silence. On the other hand, my mother looked on as if this were a heartwarming scene.

After a moment, she turned to my father. "Are your suspicions cleared with this?"

"It's too soon to draw a conclusion. We need to observe longer."

*What are they talking about? They didn't mention a subject, so I don't understand what they're discussing.*

Noticing my prying eyes focused on them, my father let out a heavy sigh. "Didn't I tell you that the stone broke?"

I looked at him, confused as to why he'd reiterated that fact. "Yes?"

His pale-blue eyes narrowed, thick with exacerbation. "And when it broke, the closest person to it...was you."

*Assuming it broke when she fell, then yes, I was the closest person to her. So, what are you trying to say?* The realization hit me before I'd even finished thinking that.

"I... I see," I hoarsely murmured, the timbre of my voice shaky.

*The stone broke, which means the seal on the demon lord has also been dissolved. So the next question is...who has become the vessel?*

*There's a possibility that the demon lord is possessing me since I was the closest person. No, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that I'm the number one candidate right now. So that's why father and mother were excessively concerned with my health. And, to probe for any anomalies, they asked me if I'd had any dreams.*

I tried to analyze the situation with a calm mind, but honestly, I felt like my head was about to burst. *I've never even considered that the demon lord could possess me. If... If he really is inside of me right now, then what should I do? Will my consciousness still remain?*

A chill ran down my spine as I imagined my sanity slowly eroding and then gradually disappearing without a trace... *I'm scared of vanishing. And even more than that, I'm terrified that my body might harm the people I hold dear. My precious companions, friends, and family... Am I going to hurt them all?*

*"Princess."*

Sir Leonhart's smile flashed through my mind and I felt a grating pain in my chest. *What if I try to kill Sir Leonhart? And what if he tries to kill me too?* The mental image of him pointing his blade at me almost made me stop breathing.

"Don't worry," the shrine maiden said as she squeezed my hand reassuringly. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying, but she looked me straight in the eye. "You're not the demon lord."

*"Lady Fuzuki...?"*

"Cause you were just peachy after I hugged you, right? If you were the demon lord, then I think being around me would be painful!"

*O-Oh, really?* Spellbound by the shrine maiden's positive attitude, I nodded. *To sum it all up, she came along to inspect whether the demon lord had possessed me. If I were the demon lord's vessel, then it's probable that I'd reject my natural enemy—the shrine maiden. But it's unclear how effective the shrine maiden's touch would be against the unsealed demon lord, so it's still too soon to decide. That's why father said we needed to wait and see.*

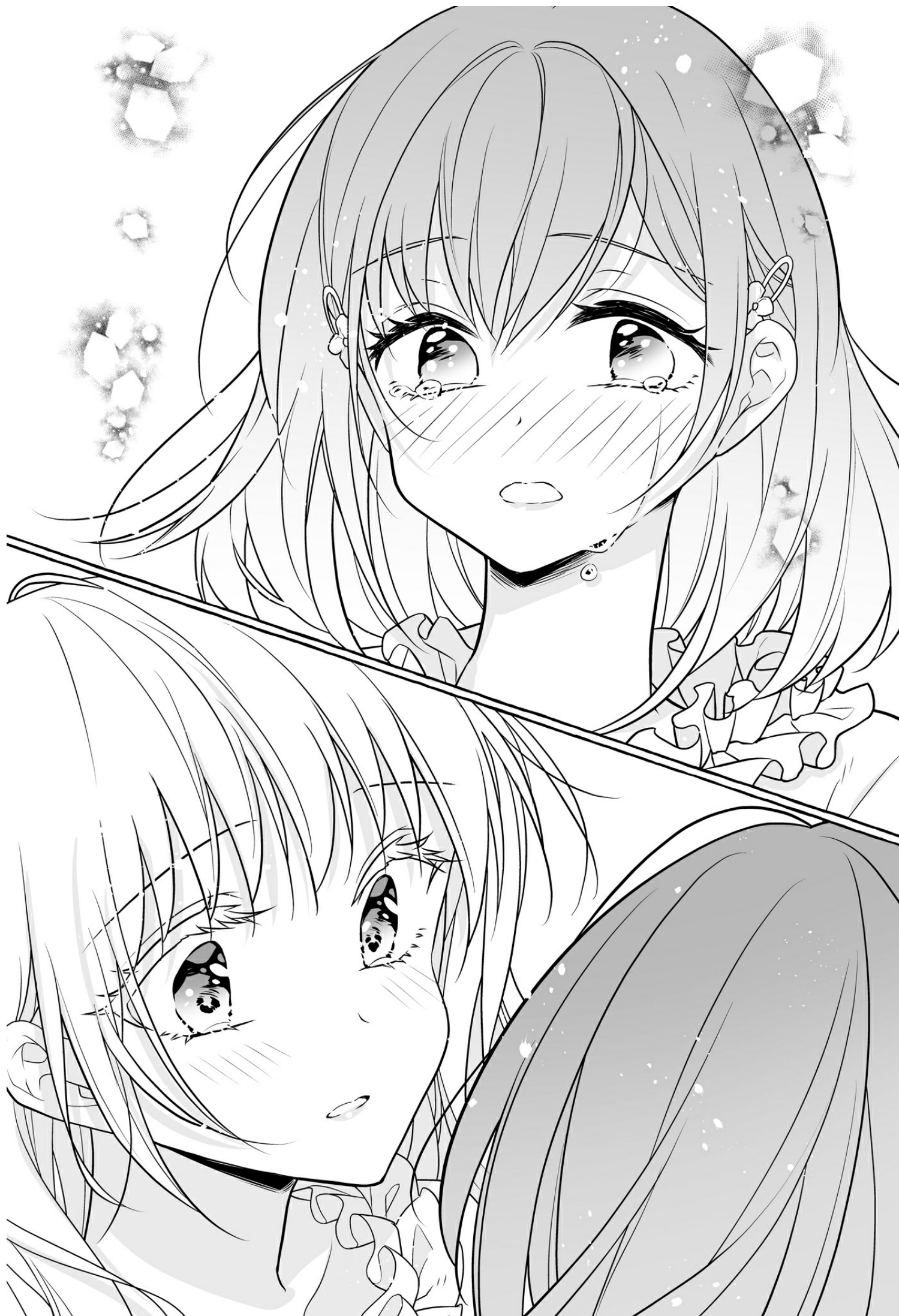
"Ah! Unless...do you dislike it?!" The shrine maiden paled and she let go of me.

I immediately shook my head in denial. "I don't dislike it! You smell nice..."

*No, wait, hold on right there! That's definitely over the line! I sound like a pervert! A pervert wearing the skin of a princess!* Flustered, I wanted to append to my statement, but the words to smooth over the slip of my tongue wouldn't come to me. My indecent inner thoughts had flooded out and it was far too late to take them back.

I nervously looked at the shrine maiden; her doe eyes had become perfect circles. One last teardrop streamed down her cheek. Then, in an instant, her face was dyed crimson from her soft cheeks to the tip of her ears.





Her plump lips opened and closed repeatedly as if she were filter feeding on air. The vivid change in her demeanor enraptured me.

A loud clap returned me to my senses. I looked in the direction of the sound and made eye contact with my father's acrid face.

"For now, it seems like there are no issues with your condition."

"Uh-huh..." came my insipid reply.

My father's face soured even more, but he didn't say anything and addressed the shrine maiden next. "Miss Fuzuki. I thank you for your cooperation. We're finished examining her, so you can step away now."

"Huh? Oh, yesh!"

Red-faced, the shrine maiden jumped away from me. She shuffled backward slowly, abashed for reasons beyond me. Her movements resembled those of an uncoiled tin robot. She continued backing out of the room just like that.

My father followed after her but stopped for a moment. He shot me a sharp glance and, in a quiet voice, said, "Stop haphazardly seducing everyone."

"Huh?"

"*That one* normally puts on the mask of an understanding adult, but he can be surprisingly petty when it comes to you. Don't play around too much."

"I don't understand what you're trying to say."

*I really wish you'd stop talking while being unclear about the subject. I can't glean anything from that. Who is "that one"? What the hell did I do? I have no intention of seducing anyone besides Sir Leonhart, you know!*

Leaving me offended, my father exited the room with the shrine maiden.

# The Reincarnated Princess's Remorse

After resting in bed for many days, I was finally able to walk around. I'd always regarded myself as the indoor bookworm type, so I'd thought obediently staying in my room wouldn't be too hard, but it turned out that being trapped in bed was tough. I now fully understood that humans needed moderate amounts of exercise and sunlight.

There was one other thing that was very difficult to bear—I hadn't seen my beloved cat, Nero, since the day he'd collapsed. The maid who'd tried to assassinate the shrine maiden had slammed him hard against the wall. Apparently, though he hadn't broken any bones, he had suffered a sprain. When I'd heard that he was languid with a fever, I'd snuck out to see him...though I'd been found en route and forced back into bed.

*The royal family's personal doctor is an age-old veteran, and since he's looking after Nero, there's probably nothing to worry about. But...I still want to see him. I want to see my cute Nero's face. And, if possible, I want to bury my nose in his wonderful floof... However, I mustn't hinder his recovery, so I'll just have to put up with it.*

Now that I could roam the halls freely at last, the first thing I did was go visit Nero. As I walked through the cloister, I could see the castle garden between the evenly spaced columns. The sunlight was dazzling, and I could feel its heat even from the shade. The gardener must've watered the flowers recently since there was dew glistening on top of the white petals. The little drops shone bright enough to make my eyes sting. The treetops rustled in the tepid breeze, which wasn't particularly pleasant against the skin, but it was preferable to Japan's humidity.

"It looks like it'll be hot today," I murmured, gazing up at the clear sky.

Klaus, who was walking alongside me, turned a worried eye toward me. "You're still in a period of convalescence, so won't the heat be unbearable? I think it'd be best to delay any walks for a few more days."

*Crap. My guard has become even more overprotective while I've been recovering, and I've just agitated his unease. If I say anything that'd indicate any sign of agreement, then he'll instantly carry me off and stuff me back into bed.*

*"I'm fine. I feel wonderful today." Hold on, that sounds like something a sickly older sister or mother would say to raise a death flag. Klaus should've had no knowledge of such clichés, but his mien was still filled with anxiety. With a small frown, I added, "Truly, I am fine. Don't worry so much."*

Klaus's brows sagged and he mumbled, "I worry."

Guilt welled up inside of me. An illusion of a well-groomed doggy with its ears and tail flattened dejectedly overlapped with the image of my guard.

*You're just Klaus... You're not supposed to be so cute... But I felt a little twinge, just a small one! Whew, that was close. If I let him sweep me off my feet now, it'll be back to bed life again for me!*

"My body will debilitate if I don't move around to some degree. If I feel any pain, I'll tell you immediately."

"Do...you promise?"

"I promise." I nodded many times over until Klaus reluctantly gave in. *Whew. If I have to stay in bed any longer, I'll probably develop root rot.*

When we reached the court physician's room, I knocked on the door. An amicable voice urged us to enter. I left Klaus standing guard in the hallway and stepped inside. I caught a whiff of a peculiar odor when I stepped in; it resembled the scent of medicine that I'd often smelled in the Khuer village. It wasn't a fragrant smell, but I didn't dislike it. An elderly man in his sixties sat in a chair looking at me.

"Welcome, Princess," he said with a smile—Dominic von Telemann was his name, the royal family's personal physician. His crown was utterly bald, but he still had hair around the back and sides of his head, and a white beard fell past his chin. He was a dandy-looking old man.

"Hello, Dr. Tele...mann." I stiffened up before all the syllables left my mouth.

Another person was inside the room, someone unexpected.

“Princess, did you come to check up on the recovery of your cat too?”

As the good doctor’s “too” indicated, the preceding visitor had also come to see Nero. That man’s eyes were wide—my appearance had clearly been unanticipated.

“Captain Orsein has visited Nero many times now because he was the one who brought him here,” Dr. Telemann explained, sensing my confusion. In contrast to the doctor’s cordial expression, Sir Leonhart looked gauche.

*Oh, so Sir Leonhart was the one who carried Nero here when he was injured. He must be busy protecting the shrine maiden and commanding the royal guard, so I can’t believe he took the time to deliver Nero to the doctor himself. I already knew he was a kind man...but I’ve fallen for him all over again. Well, I’ve already fallen for Sir Leonhart dozens of times, but I’m sure as long as I’m with him, I’ll always discover more things to love.*

“He gets more visitors than human patients. This little one sure is loved.” Dr. Telemann chortled and gently petted the sleeping Nero’s head.

Nero’s eyes were peacefully shut, but it pained me to see the bandages wrapped around his forelimb.

“Doctor, how is Nero’s health?” I asked.

“There are no abnormalities with his bones, and the swelling in his forelimb has gone down, but I’d like to keep an eye on him a bit more. Princess, I’m sure you must be very lonely without him, but please let this old geezer take care of him for a little longer.” His voice was gentle, as if he were soothing a child.

I gave him a small nod and lowered my head. “Doctor, please take good care of Nero.”

“He’s in good hands,” replied Dr. Telemann. “Now then. Since you’ve come all this way, I’ll brew some tea for you both.” He stood up from his chair with a small “hup.”

“Oh, no! I’ve seen Nero already, so I’ll return to my room now.”

“I also must get back to work.”

Sir Leonhart and I both firmly refused his offer, but Dr. Telemann did not

falter. “Don’t be so hasty. Please think of it as accompanying this old man in passing the time. It’ll only take me a moment, so take a seat.”

The doctor dismissed our rejection and left the room. Sir Leonhart and I exchanged glances. It’d been so long since the two of us had been alone that I felt kind of shy. The silence felt awkward, so I fumbled around my head for a topic to talk about.

“O-Oh, come to think of it, Sir Leonhart, you were the one who brought Nero to the doctor. Thank you very much.”

“Not at all. I didn’t do anything special,” he humbly replied.

I shook my head slowly, then dropped my gaze to Nero and gently stroked his fur. His coat had become somewhat stiff, which was heartrending. *I want to see Nero’s pretty blue eyes soon.*

“He’s very important to me. Thank you for saving him.”

Sir Leonhart muttered something quietly, but I only caught the tail end of it: “...to me too.”

Since I’d missed what he’d said, I looked back up at him. “What did you...?” My voice trailed off before I could finish asking him to repeat himself.

The bitter expression coloring his face made my mind go blank. Before I could ask him if he was hurt somewhere, he grasped my hand. It didn’t hurt, but it was rougher than his usual tender, calming touch, so it surprised me.

“You are very important to me too.”

I breathed in sharply.

“Why do you care so much for others but treat yourself so poorly?” he asked. “Do you think I’d feel nothing if you were to get hurt?”

I was overwhelmed by how gruffly he was speaking to me, but I knew these were Sir Leonhart’s bare-bones feelings, no frills attached.

“The whole time you were bedridden, I was numb with fear.” Feelings poured out of his mouth in that low, husky voice. I couldn’t take my eyes off him. His downcast black eyes had a dangerous glint to them, and I could only listen quietly. “I know that letting someone die in front of you is not an option. But I

can't help but wish that you would. If the cost of saving another is you being harmed, then I'd rather you pretend like you didn't see anything at all."





His grip on my wrist tightened so much that it throbbed. I let out a small cry and he instantly returned to his senses. Sir Leonhart released my hand with a start and reeled backward. He covered his mouth in disbelief at what he'd just done.

“Princess... My deepest apologies!”

“Sir Leonhart, I—”

“Please, excuse me!”

Sir Leonhart turned away and raced out of the room. I heard the door hectically open and close, followed by Klaus's voice, and then his presence quickly faded away.

I lightly held the wrist that had been enveloped in his hand and sank down to the floor. Too many things had happened all at once. My mind couldn't keep up, but there was one thing I knew.

I had hurt Sir Leonhart.

“Sir Leonhart...”

I gently pressed my wrist against my cheek. It didn't sting anymore, but it felt rather hot against my skin.



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The Reincarnated Princess Spends Another Day Skipping Story Routes:  
Volume 6

by Bisu

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